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By

DENVER BARDWELL

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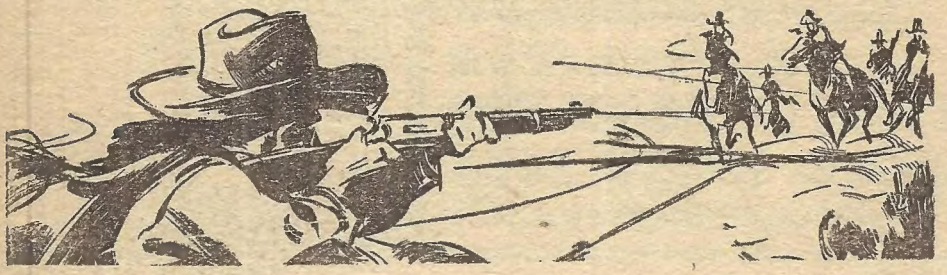
Volume 8 ★ ★ ★ ★ Number 4

WESTERN ACTION

★ ★ ★ ★ Contents for November, 1943 ★ ★ ★ ★



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WEST OF THE SUNSET . . . . . By Denver Bardwell 10

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SHORT STORY

THE TRAIL TRAP . . . . . By T. W. Ford 96

Little Joe Bodie figured that if he set a big enough trap, he was bound to catch someone who knew about the bushwhack murder of Solitaire Tice!

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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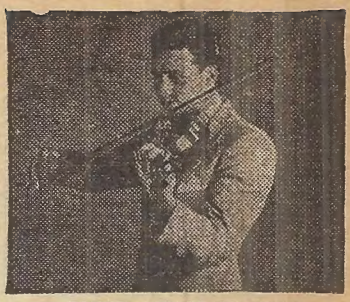

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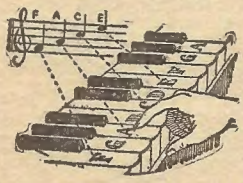

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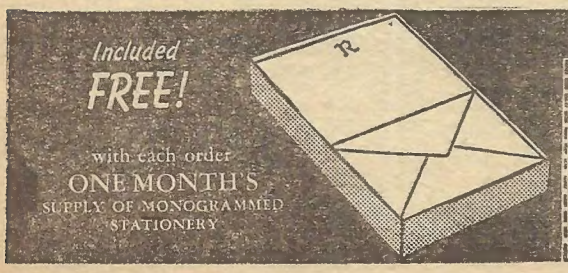

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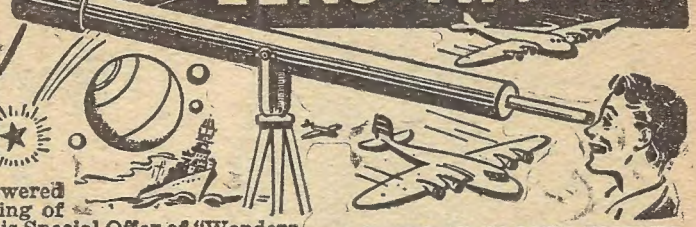

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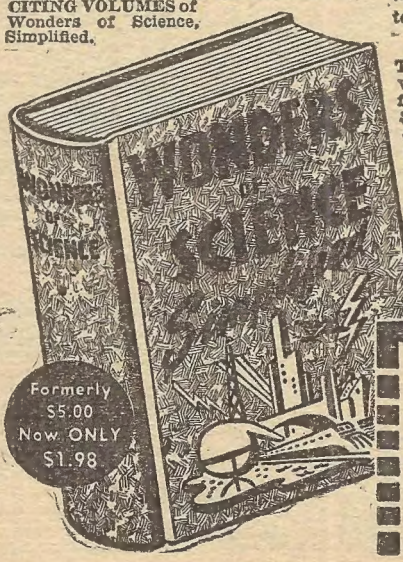

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One of Ben's men was thrown headlong as his horse fell . .

WEST OF THE SUNSET

Complete Book-Length Novel

By Denver Bardwell

(Author of "Killers of the Diamond A," "Prairie Fire," etc.)

CHAPTER I

TINY rills of water from the remnants of the past winter's snow whispered in the shadowed places in every south bank of

the coulees and on the north flanks of the steeper hog-backs in the heart of the prairie. Snow was no longer visible except above the foothills of the Continental Divide, far in the west.

Ben Boston stood motionless, fighting a silent battle while he leaned against the long pole hitch-rack in front of his well-tended yard and solid, two-story mountain log house. It was the home his father had built when the Boston herds ranged, unhindered by barbed wire and plowed fields, for twenty miles and more over these mellow prairies of rich buffalo grass. Now the barbed wire and the farmers' plows had come in such numbers that a man, raised as a cattleman's son on the free, limitless range, could not breathe. Surveyors and posthole diggers! Plows and wheat drillers!

He turned his face away from these nearer scenes to gaze longingly over the Continental Divide, on to the gray-blue horizon above the glistening, snow-capped peaks and ridges. Over there was the land of his dreams, where plows and barbed wire should never reach.

The drone of voices at the corrals rose and fell. Banker Horace Bollinger, once a ranchman himself, was down there with Jase Huggins and Watt Craigie tallying the last of the Boston herds. Bollinger was buying the ranch to suit a whim of his daughter, Lucy. Ben had already signed over the deed to old Horace.

Lucy's fingers were now running over the piano keys, lightly, tauntingly, as she did everything. Then she struck into a melody which Ben had loved much when his mother used to play it.

He straightened up, lifting his arms from the pitchpole, and cast an impatient glance toward the open window. Lucy Bollinger was in plain sight as her fingers played upon the keys. Her face was turned to the window and she watched him impishly. She saw his scowl and his move to go away. Suddenly she ceased playing and ran through the hallway, darting out upon the porch.

"Wait a minute, Ben," she cried. There was her usual tone of command, but a note of petulance was there, too.

"I want to talk with you, Ben," she said, coming to lean with him on the horizontal pole. She stamped her foot lightly and put a hand impatiently on his right shoulder to enforce her next command. "Look at me, Ben. Are you mad at me for getting father to buy you out?"

Like ghosts in the night, the cattle vanished from the Sugar Bowl ranch, and other spreads in Escolante. And Ben Boston knew that somehow, suave Barr Orkin was engineering the rustle, yet no proof could be found. Then the whine of drygulch bullets told Ben he was stumbling on the trail . . . .

HE GLANCED once into her brilliant eyes, then his eyes lost the sadness that had recently become their set expression. A twinkle of amusement flickered in them, raising a flush of anger on Lucy Bollinger's face, even before he turned his gaze again to the snow-lined western horizon.

"No, Lucy. You have done me a great favor," he replied.

Her anger, like all her quick-changing emotions, died in a flash. She leaned nearer him, speaking more softly, pleadingly.

"I'm glad you see it that way, Ben. I want you to do me a favor, a big one. Will you?"

"Sure—if I can. What is it?"

"You love this place, don't you?" she asked and held her breath for his answer.

"It was one to be loved until the plows and barbed wire begun to ruin the country round-about. Now a grasshopper can make one jump and

land on the other side of the biggest cattle ranch left in the country. Ugh!"

He grimaced with disgust.

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" Lucy cried and took her hand suddenly from his shoulder. "You're an old fossil already at twenty-six. Why, that's good for the country. It's got to settle up some time. It brings in more people and more money. This will be great farming country before long. Why won't you see the light, Ben? You could be rich some day."

"I will be rich, Lucy, but in a land where I'm free to turn around without tearing my elbows on barbed wire. Your dad asked me to stay on here to manage this place. I can't—it tears something from the inside of me to see them damned plows ripping up the buffalo grass that has been here always, and that'll never grow again, once it's tore up that way. It—"

"Oh, Ben, listen to me," Lucy cried. "You wouldn't think of going away; you can't. I've heard you say that you loved it here better than any place you've ever seen. Listen to me, Ben Boston." She seized his arm and made him look at her again. "That was the favor I wanted to ask you. Father offered you this job because I wanted it that way. Stay on here, Ben, and you'll go far. You'll be rich, the richest man in this country some day. You could even go into the banking business with father."

"Your father would do anything for you, Lucy, even to buying the men for you who won't kow-tow before your pretty toes any other way."

It was a softly spoken reproach as a big, tolerant brother would speak to a fractious young sister. For a few seconds Lucy Bollinger bit her full, red underlip, her chest rising and falling with quick breaths. With her shoulder against his, she spoke sweetly, her face very near.

"We have always been such grand friends, Ben," she said. "You have many friends around here, people who like you. You couldn't leave this country." She gave the mountains another snappy glance, following his steadfast gaze. "You would miss the sight of those big mountains and you'd have to come back where you could see them every day as long as you live. They affect me that way, too."

She looked at the mountains as yearningly as he had gazed in their direction.

"You're a smart girl, Lucy," he told her, "but you missed that shot. That wasn't what I was looking at, or thinking about."

"What was it, then?" She nudged his shoulder and leaned farther in front of him to look into his eyes.

"You see that yard or so of murky gray just above the mountain tops, trailing off into the blue above?"

She looked. "That's just the reflection of the shadows behind the mountains, or the contrast against the white of the snow below."

"Smart again," he complimented, "but you still don't see it. I'm looking farthar on than that. 'Way over there, maybe a thousand miles yonder side, is a country hemmed in by mountains, with the greenest valleys of grass in the world and the fattest cows. I've heard of such—a country where a cowman don't even have to fence in his cattle lines, because the mountains rear up straight walls to hold them for him. It's so far from railroads and markets that no nesters will ever sin against God and the cow country by plowing up the grass. I've watched the sun setting behind the mountains yonder. This country I'm going to is 'way over there, west of that place where the sun sets."

IT WAS early in May. A month and a week had passed since Ben Boston, Jase Huggins and Watt Craigie rode away from Antelope Springs. They had hurried through the rough country in order to reach Escolante before that tax sale in May.

One of the blanket rolls stirred into motion. Ben Boston came out of it, throwing the blankets back. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, then reached for his boots. While he pulled these on he looked about him. They had arrived at this jumping-

off place on the western rim of the high, wooded mesa late the night before. Ben knew they must be near the country Tubby Horton had described. Recent inquiries along the way had confirmed Tubby's incredible story.

Now he looked first at the rising sun through the scattered pine and cedar growth eastward across the mesa they had traversed. But quickly he turned to the west. He snatched on his last boot and jumped to his feet, his face alight with wonder and pleasure.

The dark green valley below turned slowly around to the southwest many miles away and seemed to join, six or eight miles below, with other valleys coming in from behind the western and southern heaven-high walls of rocky escarpments. There was a cluster of houses down there indicating a fair-sized town. That should be Escolante.

For many moments Ben Boston stood there entranced. Then a faint change began to come over his face and darken his eyes. He bent his gaze to more intent study of the almost treeless expanse of green grass far below, north and south. Two or three miles away beside the river he could see the spiral of smoke above an indistinct ranch establishment. He saw a house and corrals there, but his most minute search in the nearer foreground revealed only a scattering of much less than a hundred cattle along the river course.

"What the damnition's the matter?" he wondered aloud. "Must be something worse wrong than Tubby Horton knew about. If all that green I see is grass as high and thick as I think it is, there oughta be thousands of beef head in sight."

"HEY, Ben, what the devil you talkin' to yourself about?" Jase Huggins demanded, stumbling in his high-heeled boots, coming toward the enraptured younger man.

"Come on and doctor your eyes on a peep of Heaven, Jase," he invited. "Did you ever see such glory?"

Watt Craigie, younger and more springly than Huggins, came running toward his friends then, gaping at the scene as Ben Boston had done. Huggins was snorting. After half a minute he spoke.

"We ain't woke up yet, Ben. It jest ain't natchul for anything to be so durned purty and big. It ain't true. Le's go back and wake ourselves up from this fool dream."

Ben Boston took a deep breath.

"It's the place we been hunting, all right. I sure hope that house and corral three miles up the river is the busted outfit Tubby talked about. I aim to buy 'em out, or as big a hunk of this valley as forty thousand dollars'll take in."

Jase Huggins' keen eyes, trained through long years, were studying the valley stretches.

"I don't see signs o' many cows down there," he said. "You better hold back enough o' that forty thousand to buy stock with."

"Hell," Watt Craigie said with sudden pessimism, "ain't a chance in the world that anybody a-holt o' such as that would ever be fool 'nough to part with it for money. We better go right down and haze 'em out with our guns."

"You'd better forget that itching gun-finger," Ben Boston advised Craigie. "This looks too much like a land of peace to be spoilt by such hotheads as the likes of you. Besides, if we've come straight and this is the right place, it's up for sale cheap."

"I'll bet you my first six months' wages on the new spread, wherever you set it, that a plumb desirable country like this ain't so peaceful like you figger. I never yet seen a country worth a whole lot that there wasn't plenty varmints tryin' to steal the hide off it by some hook or crook. Where there's honey there's sure gonna be flies."

Ben Boston looked at Craigie with troubling doubt in his glance.

"Let's chuck up and get on down," he ordered. "We'll soon get the lay of the land. One thing's sure and certain: It's worth a big fight."

CHAPTER II

IT WAS well up into mid-morning before Ben Boston and his companions, leading their three pack horses, found a cattle trail down through a break in the mesa wall. They came to the rich bunch grass of the valley and looked about with increasing wonder. It was Jase Huggins who spoke the question in the minds of all three men. He spit tobacco juice, swallowed, waggling his protuberant Adam's apple up and down like a jackrabbit running.

He said: "It sure is mighty funny that there ain't no more cows in sight on all this whompus fine grass."

"There's been a-plenty on it in times past," Ben Boston asserted. "That cut we come through has been used a long time and by lots of hoofs being drove up to summer pasture on the mesa."

"But it's not been clumb by no herds this spring," Watt Craigie contributed.

"There's no need," Ben Boston said, riding ahead. He looked at the ranch house and empty cow corrals a half mile away on the west side of the river. "What few beef critters are left in this big cup of grassland wouldn't graze out one corner of the grass all summer. Maybe the cow-raising business don't pay out here."

"Maybe," Ben conceded.

They crossed the river of clear water where it flowed, knee-deep to the horses, over a gravelly, wide ford. The place had been much used in former times as the aged signs on both sides indicated.

When they came near to the big, vacant corrals and the ranch house, they saw a small boy slide off the corral pole fence and start slowly toward the house while he watched them speculatively. The big house was built like an old colonial mansion, a strangely beautiful, but incongruous sight in this new land. Two riders came into view then from behind a bend of the river tree line in the south, a few hundred yards away.

A man came from the big house porch. The boy saw the man coming and halted. Whatever doubts had bothered him seemed to abate. The man from the house wore black corduroys tucked into cowboy boots. He had on a gray and black striped shirt, a big dingy red neckerchief spiraled through a tight circlet of cowhorn and a black, high-peaked, broadbrimmed hat with a rattlesnake skin for a hatband. What interested Ben Boston mostly about the man's wardrobe was the belt of cartridges and sagging .45 at his waist. And the man's face was hard as he came near.

THE oncoming riders from the south were loping up within a hundred yards when Ben came close enough to the boy for greeting. He swung down from the saddle before the youngster, more to show the advancing cowboy that he wore no gun than for anything else specific. His gun was in his saddlebags.

"Hello, sonny," Ben greeted the boy. The little fellow was about twelve years old. He wore a boy's-sized Stetson and goat-haired chaps that he had slightly outgrown, for they came too much above his shoe tops.

"Hello, mister," he replied, unsmiling. "But my name's Buster—Buster Lee."

Ben laughed and leaned over, extending his hand to the very serious Buster.

"All right, Buster. I'm glad to know you, and I won't ever call you sonny again. By name's Ben—Ben Boston. Do you live here?"

"Yes, sir. That is—I been—"

"Sure, stranger, the kid lives here," the suspicious cowboy stopped behind the boy and answered the question. "What do you fellers want?"

"Can we see the boss of this spread?" Ben asked.

"I'm that gent," the fellow replied, flinging his glance from Ben to the still mounted men behind him. "If you're lookin' for jobs, there ain't none 'round here. This lay-out is folded."

"Say, Pike," the boy broke in, "I

like Ben. I guess Betty would hire him, 'cause I bet he could find them missing cows—him and his partners, there."

The two riders from the south drew up their mounts to a walk twenty steps away and came slowly nearer. The cowboy must have known them well, for he didn't turn his attention away from the matter immediately before him.

"You better run on to the house, Buster," he advised. "I'll handle this. Go on. Git!"

He spoke angrily when the boy didn't budge.

"Oh, all right," the boy agreed morosely. He cast Ben a friendly grin in between his scowls of chagrin. "I'll go ask Betty to hire them. You cant boss her around.

The gun-wearing cowboy, whom Buster had called Pike, looked after the retreating youngster as if he was about to call him back, then let him go and turned his attention to the two new arrivals.

"Good mornin, Mr. Orkin," he greeted. "How're you, Joe? Git down and shake your legs out. I guess—"

He stopped whatever he was going to say and looked at Ben Boston. It was plain that he didn't want to talk while Ben listened. Ben felt uncomfortable, but was burning with anxiety to hear more about this place which Pike had said was "folded." That meant definitely that it was the place up for tax sale.

"All right, pardner," he agreed, gathering up his bridle reins. "We'll mozey on, but before I go, I wish you'd give me a little light. You said this lay-out was folded up. Looks like it's been a pretty big spread in other days. Does it take in all this walled-up valley? I mean, all in one spread, under one ownership?"

Pike looked up at the well-dressed man he had called Orkin. Ben saw that he was deferring unmistakably to the big man in the saddle and looked to see who Orkin might be. The latter was middle-aged, perhaps not yet forty, handsome, full-faced, with ruddy cheeks and sandy hair. He was dressed in city clothes, even wore a white collar and black, four-in-hand tie. He frowned a bit when Ben showed such keen interest in this valley, but regarded Ben now with a tolerant smile and glanced at Ben's companions, took in their saddles, their riding horses and pack animals.

"You travel heavy, stranger," he finally commented. "I take it that you're not common chuckliners. If you want jobs I doubt you'll find any at cowpoking in this country. Maybe 'way over west or down 'cross the line in Arizona, but not in here."

"But this valley looks like the finest cow land I've ever seen," Ben insisted. "Why isn't it full of fat beef? Who owns it?"

"I do, my friend," Orkin replied.

BEN saw Pike turn his face and look apprehensively toward the house where Buster had disappeared through the front door.

"All of it?"

"Every bit, including grazing rights on the east mesa."

"What'll you take for it?"

There was a flshing, startled light in Orkin's pale blue eyes, then a twinkle of reassuring amusement.

"One hundred thousand dollars." He smiled broadly, noting the quick look of pain on Ben's face.

"I guess it's worth it," Ben said, the spirit gone out of his manner. He swung into the saddle on his dark gray saddler. Maybe this wasn't the place he had heard about, or had already been tax sold.

"Bet your life it's worth it," Orkin boasted.

"What's the name of that little town down at the mouth of this valley?" Ben asked from the saddle, hoping now that it wouldn't be Escolante.

"Not much of a place to put up in," Orkin countered. "There's a better town and more cow ranches down the San Juan fifty or seventy-five miles west. Head around the south butt of the west wall and go straight west till you strike the San Juan. You'll bump into Mormon

Crossing, a good cow town. You can't miss it."

"Thanks a heap," Ben told him, pulling on the pack horse's lead rope to stop the hungry animal from cropping at the short grass. "We'll be mozeying. S'long, gents."

"S'long, feller," Pike said. Orkin and his man, Joe, tilted their heads slightly in wordless farewells, watching Ben and the two others who were as doleful looking in their disappointment as their leader.

The three riders had reached the bend in the river which hid them from the ranch before any of them spoke. Jase Huggins urged his saddler and pack horse to come up even with Ben Boston.

"What the tarnation devil's up here, Ben?" he demanded. "That first gink said this spread was folded up, meanin' it was busted. Then this smart-lookin' guy, Orkin, comes along sayin' he owns it and wants a hundred thousand smackers for it. I cain't see the tie-in. What you think?"

"I've been thinking, Jase, but maybe we'd better wait and see what we find out in town."

"Down to that town we seen below?" Jase asked, puzzled. "I thought we'd be headin' west."

"Think again, old tail-twister," Ben told him. "I'm not passing up this pretty prize here till I know it's out of my reach, plumb definite. I still believe it's the place Tubby talked about, and I smelt something stinking back there 'tween the way them fellers, Pike and Orkin, talked and acted. I wonder how the little kid, Buster, comes in?"

THEY rode on with no further talk for several miles. A trail led off from the main south road, going west. The south butt of the western mesa wall was due west of them, ending in a tumbled, broken mass of rock piled down to the rise of the grass land. A few scraggly trees grew among the heaps of broken down wall rock. But Ben Boston never considered the west trail. He kept their course down the river road.

"Hey, Ben," Watt Craigie called from behind Huggins. "Yonder comes that feller that was with the town dude, Orkin."

Ben and Jase looked back. The man was loping his horse around the last bend in the line of river willows. With a wave of his hand he was signalling to them.

Holding up on the reins, Ben stopped. Jase Huggins said: "I wonder what he wants?"

"Plain as a black calf in moonlight," Ben answered. "That guy, Orkin, wants us to go west from here. He's sent us a guide to make sure."

Watt Craigie was the only one of the three who loved his gun so much that he encumbered his body with it while riding on a peaceful journey. He never took it off except at dances, or when city marshals enforced no-gun rules. Ben Boston was not displeased now with the red-headed, fiery youngster's habit, for he had seen the gun swinging at the belt of the man called Joe.

Joe came up to the waiting trio. There was a flicker of excitement in his eyes. He was a muscular, solid man, sun-browned and hard. He had a long nose with a Roman hook, close-set eyes and prominent teeth showing between heavy lips.

"Say, ain't you fellers passin' your trail?" he asked, pulling up. "Back there's the west trail to Mormon Crossin'."

"We guessed that much when we passed it, pardner," Ben Boston replied. "We're aiming to sample the accommodations in the town down valley."

"There ain't none in Escolante. No hotel there for strangers."

Ben smiled grimly across set jaws at hearing the town was Escolante. He replied: "Looked like, from the mesa top this morning that there was quite a passle of houses down there. Must be that wayfarers can get some grub for a change."

"You'll find Escolante a mighty dry place to lay over in," Joe went on doggedly. "I'd sure advise you, real friendly like, to head straight on for Mormon Crossin'."

"Come outa the fog, pardner," Ben invited, a snap in his usually soft drawl when he saw Joe eyeing Craigie's gun. "Spill the cards out plain. Just why does your Mr. Orkin want us to point our little herd away from this unhospitable Escolante town?"

"Just like I told—. Say, stranger, Mr. Orkin don't give a damn whether you hit Escolante or not. I just heard 'im givin' you some very kind directions how to head for Mormon Crossin' and I thought you'd take good advice. Maybe you're the kind that just don't like good advice, in which case I'm not botherin' you with no more. Sorry I stopped you. S'long."

He spurred his pony and galloped away ahead of them. Ben sat watching him for a few seconds, then started in the same direction.

"On to Escolante," he called back to his companions. "I smell a lot more stink now that don't belong in this glory land. Strap on that old hogleg of yours, Jase, just to keep you from forgetting the scales it's rubbed on your boney hip."

He reached back while he rode and took his own gun and belt from the saddlebag. He buckled it on, then drew the .45, whirled the cylinder, watching closely for the cartridges in it before he dropped the gun lightly again into its holster.

FOR a half minute after the man Joe had ridden away, his warning still fresh in the minds of the men he left, Ben Boston rode along at the head of his little cavalcade, watching the man ride swiftly toward Escolante. Suddenly he began to untie the lead rope. He flung the rope end to Jase Huggins, who automatically caught it, his eyes widened, his mouth open in astonishment as he watched Ben's actions.

"Bring in my pack horse," Ben directed. "Meet me in the center of town. I'll be around there somewhere when you get in."

"Wait a minute, Ben!" Jase cried. "Put us hep. What you aimin' at?"

"That growling cuss going yonder is running ahead to grease the chutes in Escolante for us 'fore we can get there," Ben called back as he urged his iron-gray, long-legged saddler into a run. "You fellers come on with your peepers wide open."

Skillet, the iron-gray under Ben, was a mixture of racing breed and tough range horse, but he was somewhat out of racing form now, after a month of hard going over rough country. Ben guessed that the smaller-bodied, boney-hipped mount under the man ahead was wiry and tough, perhaps much fresher than Skillet, but he was sure his horse could still outrace and outlast the shorter-legged animal.

Orkin's man had nearly a quarter of a mile handicap at the start, but he lost half of this before he looked back and saw his pursuer. He did not break his gait at once. After Ben had gained another hundred yards on him, he spurred his pony to its limit. This went on for nearly a mile, with Ben coming gradually up within calling distance.

"Slow down, pardner," he shouted. "I got a proposition to make you!"

Joe saw that he was being overtaken, anyway. He brought his shaggy little mount to an abrupt halt, jerking up violently on the reins as if angry at the beast. He was scowling darkly at Ben when the latter stopped, facing him. His gun-hand was loose at his side. Ben noted that.

"What you gotta say?" he demanded.

"Want to make a little bet?" Ben asked. "Ten dollars I can beat you into Escolante." He didn't want to run past and have the fellow's gun behind him without some excuse for the race.

Joe thought a moment and looked Skillet over keenly. "You got a racer there, but he's wore down some," he said grudgingly.

"You've got a good horse eye," Ben complimented. "Maybe that makes the broncs an even bet."

"No it don't. This scrub is a wild one from Oregon—plenty tough on rough goin', but no lightnin' on the spurts. I ain't throwin' no money away on 'im, but I got one over to

the Oh-Kay I'll stack again yours any time you say."

"What's the Oh-Kay?"

"The Boss's spread out west o' Escolante."

"He's sorta grabbing up the whole country 'round here, eh?" Ben asked.

Joe frowned more darkly of a sudden, jabbing Ben with his close-set, squinted eyes.

"That all you overtook me for, jest to pump me?" he demanded.

"Sorry, old sox, but I didn't. Forget it. I really wanted to stretch Skillet's legs here, it's been so long since he had some long, smooth ground to cushion his hoofs on. I'll be seeing you in town about that race. S'long."

He loosened the reins and gave Skillet the go signal. The dark animal, still glad of his freedom from the moping park line, sped away as if he were loose and romping on the open prairie.

"Hey you, stop!" Joe shouted, spurring his long-haired captive from the wild herds.

BEN leaned low in the saddle as if to make as little windbreak as possible, but bent his head around to the right, watching the man behind, smiling and waving a farewell. He saw Joe's hand itching to go for the flopping gun as his mount made short, jarring jumps in the unequal race, but Joe never quite made up his mind in spite of his rage. It was plain that he had much reason to get into Escolante ahead of Ben Boston, but he must have also seen the gun below the tall, swaying man's hip that hadn't been there when he first saw him. In less than two minutes Ben swept over a bulge of land, around another bend of the river and lost sight of the vainly racing rider behind him.

In spite of his doubting Joe's truthfulness and good intentions, Ben had unconsciously fixed in his mind a mental picture of Escolante as a small, thrown-together shanty town with no hotel, restaurants, or even a livery stable.

It was surprise to him when he came up to the neatly laid out, tree-shaded, house-painted little city lying in the fork of the streams, one stream coming from up the valley he had traveled, the other flowing more briskly out of a narrower, higher valley northwest of Escolante. Close to it, he could not see the whole town, but he believed there were a hundred or more houses between the rivers. It must be the trading center of a big territory.

He loped up the graded street on which gravel had been spread and came to the center square of the town. There he found another surprise. A courthouse, with trees and hitchpoles on all sides of it, occupied the center of the big square like county-seat towns down in Texas where he had been, years before, with his father to buy lean cattle for fattening on their buffalo grass.

His quick survey revealed a two story hotel on the north side of the square, and scattered around the big quadrangle were various other establishments of trade, restaurants, false-fronted saloons, a blacksmith shop and a wide-fronted place with signs proclaiming it a tanning and leather-working factory. There was a First National Bank sign on a glass-windowed front to the east of the court house. The iron-barred windows of the half cellar under the court house would be the jail.

It was high noon. The hitchracks were well lined with saddled horses and vehicles; the board walks were humming with people. Only then Ben remembered that this was Saturday, the first Saturday in May.

Finding space for Skillet before the hotel, he tied him and entered the fairly spacious lobby of the Escolante Palace Hotel. Five men, two of them dressed as city inhabitants, three appearing to be cattlemen, were seated at one side of the lobby talking. As Ben walked toward the registry counter, one of the men arose and went behind the counter, looking inquiringly at Ben while he spoke.

"Howdy, stranger. Welcome to Escolante."

"Thanks, brother," Ben said. "A welcome like that sure is welcome

sounding after what I'd heard about Escolante this morning. This sure looks like a peart and pretty little city."

"You must've run into some of the Mormon folks," the man behind the counter surmised, looking steadily at Ben. "They're nice folks, them Mormons. They built this town and had it pretty fine here for a few years, but they're pulling up stakes and moving to a new place 'crost in Arizona. Too many Gentiles coming in here and not all the better sort."

"I guessed part of it, already," Ben agreed. "The part I come through getting here, up the valley, sure looked deserted, or near about. How do all the people make their living?"

"You just come through Sugar Bowl Valley, I guess, the Lee-Johnson Purchase they call it. Sort've sad story there. But there's plenty rich country all around the other sides of town, ranching, sheep-raising, and the gold mines out south that began the stampede in here and finished the rumpus with the peace-loving Mormons. This is no place any more for the psalm-singers, but you look like a gent that could take care of all four corners. Want a room?"

"Yeah. You got one big enough for three long-legged hombres, two beds in it, maybe?"

"Yep. Got just what'll suit you. Corner room, looking out on the square. When do the others get in?"

HE TURNED the registry book for Ben to sign.

"They're jogging along with the packs. Be here soon." He signed his and his men's names. "How much a day is this room?"

"American or European?" The clerk had a faintly smirking expression as if he thought Ben wouldn't know what he meant.

"European," Ben said. He and his men would want to be free to eat when and where they pleased.

"Three dollars a day, then," the clerk said, losing his faint smirk. Ben didn't like the dandy dressed fellow after that. He put down a ten dollar gold piece.

"We'll take it for three days, please, and if you don't mind, I'd like a receipt." He realized it was a far-fetched suspicion, but he was taking no chances on Orkin's influence denying him and his men accommodations.

"Sure." The clerk handed him a dollar change and began writing a receipt on a pad. "Traveling on an expense account?"

"Yeah. Tell me something. Who owns that Lee-Johnson Purchase you mentioned—that big Sugar Bowl you called it, straight north, up river?"

The clerk finished writing the receipt before he replied. He had an air of not being quite so talkative as he had been.

"I guess it's changing hands this afternoon. Mr. Orkin, owner of this hotel and some other town property and the big Oh-Kay ranch, will take it over, I guess. He's got an interest in the gold mines down south, too. He's a big man."

"How is it changing hands?" Ben insisted. "Why is Orkin taking it?"

The clerk looked displeased. He moved as if to leave the counter.

"That is something, brother, I'd rather not discuss," he said.

CHAPTER III

BEN took his keys and was shown to his room, but there was a chilly reticence about the clerk which made further confidences, or even friendly conversation impossible. The clerk left him at the room door. After looking over the big room, sampling the feel of the two double beds and a survey of the town square out of the two windows, he locked the door and went out to care for Skillet.

On the broad porch of the hotel, just before stepping down to the board sidewalk, he met Joe who had dismounted from his sweating, lathered broomtail.

"Hy-uh, Joe," he greeted jovially. "How 'bout that race? One day next week will be all right?"

"To hell with the race!" Joe growled. He gazed at Ben with a grieved and angry look. "D'ju git a room here?" He nodded in at the hotel lobby.

"What's that got to do with the race?" Ben countered.

Joe blew a breath like a snort of disgust and stomped away into the hotel. Ben grinned and went down to the hitchpole. He rode Skillet over to the blacksmith shop where he stood around while the blacksmith fitted on four shining new shoes. The burly smithy man refused politely to talk about the Sugar Bowl.

Burning with curiosity to unravel the apparently taboo mystery about the Sugar Bowl Valley, he nevertheless couldn't take time to question the stable boy, nor could he buttonhole any of the strangers around the square for questioning. One Orkin man had refused to talk about it and another, the blacksmith, who probably was not an Orkin employee, equally shied away from the subject. What could he expect from other strangers, any one of whom might be an Orkin satellite?

The more he thought of Sugar Bowl Valley, remembering its wide, mountain-walled beauty and rich, green grass, the more determined he became to find out the truth about it. Perhaps the deal for it had already been settled and the rich man, Orkin, would take it over in spite of any efforts Ben might make to sit in on the game. But piecing things together, he thought it all added up to some question about the deal not yet being completed.

He brushed elbows with many people as he made his way around the square to the hotel porch. He passed several men who wore guns openly, some wearing two, therefore his own .45 felt less conspicuous against his leg.

If Jase and Watt would just hurry and get in, so he wouldn't have to wait in the open for them, he meant to inquire at the court house, or wherever the county offices might be. There he ought to learn something about the true status of the Sugar Bowl. Quite a few people loitered around the north entrance to the court house, while others came and went through the wide doorway. Snatches of conversation here and there indicated that there was much excitement over the gold fields south of the town. Evidently Orkin had gotten in on the ground floor there, but Ben couldn't believe that the big rancher and town property owner could have been also a rough, pioneer prospector. He had most likely secured his mine holdings by other, less strenuous means.

COMING to the hotel porch, Ben leaned against one of the big posts supporting the marquee front of the hostelry. His eyes fell upon the windows on each side of the north entrance to the court house. On the west windows was the simple statement: "Sheriff's Office." On the two east windows more numerous lettering divulged that there one could find the county clerk's office, also that one should come there to file claims for recording. Ben looked down east toward where the street came in from the Sugar Bowl Valley road, along which Jase and Watt must come. He saw nothing of his friends. Maybe he would have time to satisfy some of his burning curiosity. He stepped out across the street.

In the county clerk's office a sandy-haired, slender youth informed him that the matter of the Lee-Johnson Purchase tax lien was in the hands of the sheriff across the hall. Ben hurried into the sheriff's office. A leathery-faced, lanky man of about sixty years, with a walrus moustache, graying at the edges, had just come in, picking his teeth with a quill as if he had eaten early dinner. There was a snap to his voice as he gave some orders to three clerks in the busy office. Ben saw the sheriff's shield on the man's unbuttoned vest front and also observed the cross-breast strap of a shoulder gun that was hidden, but bulging, beneath the vest. Just the bone handle of the gun peeped out.

"I guess you're the sheriff here?" Ben addressed the man and glanced at the shining golden shield.

"That's a good guess, young man," the sheriff's voice agreed in a kindly, soft tone that surprised Ben. He felt the older man's keen blue eyes studying him. "What's on your mind?"

"I'd like some straight information about the Lee-Johnson Purchase out north of here," Ben declared. "A Mr. Orkin told me out at the ranch house up valley this morning that he owns it, but a man there, who was called Pike, had just told me that it had folded. Since getting to town I've heard something hinted about the valley going to change ownership this afternoon. The county clerk's office said you are handling it. Can you put me straight?"

The sheriff's face was a study in quick changes while Ben spoke. There was a glitter, faintly spelling amazement and near anger when Orkin's statement of ownership was mentioned. This merged into a plainly angry frown on the sheriff's face by the time Ben had finished.

"Well, young feller," the old man said, "Orkin ain't quite the owner of the Sugar Bowl yet, but I guess he will be, come three o'clock today. Most people around here have gone plumb loco on gold mining, buyin' and sellin' claims for miles around the rich gold streak uncovered down south of here. Nobody, not even these here old mossbacked, cowhided cowmen from down valley and other sections that've blowed in, will even go out for a look at the Sugar Bowl. If they'd jest once set eyes on it—but what's the use tellin' 'em, like I been doin' all these last few weeks!"

He snorted disgust, shaking his moustache, then barked an order at one of the clerks.

"But what about it, Mr. Sheriff?" Ben pleaded, calling the old man's distracted glance back to him. "I don't give a whoop for all the gold mine claims from here to California. I want to buy the Sugar Bowl Valley, if I've got a chance. Is that whole valley held under one deed?"

THE sheriff had started to speak across the room to another one of his assistants, but broke off to look at Ben, his face alight with astonishment.

"You want to buy it?" he rumbled. "You—. Ah, naw, son. Even if you could, you'd better not hook your horns in that big slob of grief. Poor old Jack Lee found it a lot of grief 'fore he kicked the bucket and his upstandin', fine little girl, Betty, couldn't hold on. They stole her ragged to where the poor little kid's not been able to pay the taxes for these here last three years. I stretched the law thin for a year, givin' her a chance to make up back taxes, but, dad-gast it, I just hadda clamp down this year when I see 'em cleanin' her herd down to a measly few hundred. I argied and argied with her, tryin' to make her see it was best to save what she could, but she's a stubborn little bunch. Now she's gotta sell at auction today, at three o'clock, whether she likes it or not."

Ben began to vaguely see the setup. "How much back taxes does she owe?" he asked.

"Little over four thousand, countin' penalties that the law makes me load on the bill. In my opinion, that pretty spread, countin' grazin' rights on the mesa that go with it by Gov'ment writ, is worth all of thirty thousand, but Barr Orkin's 'bout the only one wantin' it that's got the money, and I know he ain't gonna bid half its worth. He'll steal it for less'n that if he can skeer any others out of biddin' if they might hanker to throw in a bid. Anyhow, the time's 'bout up for 'em to make their deposits for g'aranteein' their bids and nobody's put up."

"I want to make that deposit, then, Mr. Sheriff. How do I go about it?" Ben asked.

The sheriff looked at Ben quizzically. "And you don't want to find out nothin' 'bout what grief you're takin' on, son?" he asked.

"How is it that they stole 'em out so much?" Ben wanted to know. "Do you mean rustlers worked in the Sugar Bowl?"

"That's the ticket, son. The Bowl looks like it's walled in solid, but them cows just seeped away, invisible like, sorta like water seepin' through sand. Jack Lee couldn't find out how they was a-doin' it and I been over every foot of ground up there 'round the Bowl many a time, but I swan and be dadgasted if we could ever find any signs of rustlers, or how they worked the cows out. I got a idee that Barr Orkin won't have no trouble. That's w'y I'm advisin' you not to horn in. I've had 'nough grief over the Sugar Bowl in my ten years of sheriffin' here. I just wanted somebody to h'ist the bid and make Orkin pay a halfway fair price, but let him get it. If he gets it and don't lose no more to the rustlers, then I'll know something I been wantin' to know for a long time."

Ben dropped his voice so the clerks wouldn't hear. "This Barr Orkin might know, then, how them cows seep away through the sands. That it, sheriff?"

The sheriff looked worried. He said: "Barr Orkin's rich and mighty powerful, son. Don't ever make no bets agin him less'n you got four aces and a king in your fist. It might be that what I said was that Orkin is so powerful and smart he can outsmart the smartest rustlers. It's my duty first to get the tax money owin' to the county; next after that, it's my duty to get as much in the auction for the owner that's bein' sold out as I can squeeze outa the bidders. I sure wanta see little Betty get a fair price. You still wanta stand and ketch the lariat 'round your neck?"

"I want the Sugar Bowl, sheriff. I want to stock it with good beef and make it the finest cow ranch west of the big ridge."

"ALL right, my boy. It's your kettle. Bile it like you wanta, but don't—aw, you don't look like the kind that'd come 'round bellyachin' over a lost bet. I ain't been sizin' up men twenty-thirty years for nothin'. You got money in the First National?"

"I just got in town a little bit ago. I've got a little over three thousand in cash in my money belt and a forty-thousand-dollar certified check made out by the Antelope Springs, Colorado, Traders' and Cattlemen's National Bank. I guess my very limit would be a bid of thirty thousand. I'll run across and make the deposit and bring you—"

"I'll go with you," the sheriff interrupted. "Was a-goin' over there, anyhow. Come 'long." Out in the middle of the street, away from overhearing ears, he added: "Nothin'd tickle me more, son, than to see a certain high and mighty big bug in this country get set back a mile or two. He owns a heap of this town, through gamblin' and what-not, got the city marshal in his pocket, which causes me plenty grief. But if you run the bluff on—that is, if you rope in this Sugar Bowl, you better hire yourself plenty good men 'fore you stock it. You'll need 'em."

"I aim to, sheriff. What's your name, may I ask?"

"Plain John Lemming. My dad and maw even forgot to hand me a second given name. They call me 'Square John' in this country, but why, I don't know, me bein' built long and shanky this way."

Ben had seen rough and ready old-timers run to talkativeness this way before, but it was best never to cross them as it was best not to worry a fractious, frequently rattling old diamond-back.

They entered the trim little bank building that was built of native rock. The inside was shiny and new. Lemming introduced Ben to the bank president, a Mr. Blynn. The certified check was deposited and Ben's account was credited at once with the amount as if it had been made in cash.

Mr. Blynn told Ben that he knew Horace Bollinger, having met him at bankers' conventions, even knew Mrs. Bollinger and Lucy, who were friends of his wife and two daughters. The women folks, he said, had met and liked each other during the past summer at the Denver convention.

"You must come out to the house this evening, Mr. Boston," Blynn in-

vited, beaming with a secret pleasure Ben failed to understand. "There is an unusual welcome awaiting you. We heard you were coming this way."

"That's mighty kind of you, Mr. Blynn," Ben replied, his thoughts more on Sugar Bowl Valley. "I'll sure be glad to take you up on that when a little business is settled. I remember now hearing something about you nice folks from Lucy."

He suddenly remembered Lucy's threat to follow him in one of her wild impulses to prove something or other. Not that it wouldn't be pleasant to show her Sugar Bowl Valley and his new ranch—if he got it. But of course it was she who had written the Blynns of his coming. Then he remembered how Lucy always scoffed at the smell of cows, of how she turned up her pretty nose at the odor of perspiration on honest, hard-working cowboys who dared ask her for dances. He hoped she— But he recalled then that he had promised, against his better judgment, to write her when he found his land of dreams.

He and the sheriff were going out of the bank and Ben looked across the corner of the square to see Jase Huggins and Watt Craigie walking their tired mounts up to a hitchpole near the east side of the hotel.

"Yonder's my pardners, now, Mr. Lemming," he said, waving a hand toward his men. "I'll get on over there. Got a room for us together in the Palace. Sure am much obliged for all you done for me. When and where will the auction be held?"

"In front of the court house, outside my office, exactly at three o'clock." He looked at his watch. "That's less'n two hours off. Here's a tip, son. When the biddin' is opened, you keep a sharp eye out 'fore you bid and plenty double sharp after you do. Orkin's not below skullduggery. If he's got any idee you might even aim at biddin', you mightn't even get to the auction. Now, don't ever tell this, 'cause Orkin's a slick one. I never yet got any downright proof of his orneryness and till I do, I don't want 'im knowin' I got my eye on his doin's."

"I'll be there, Mr. Lemming, don't you worry. I want that Sugar Bowl country worse than I ever wanted anything in my life."

WHILE Ben was hurrying across the north side of the square to his friends, he saw Barr Orkin and his rider, Joe, standing just inside the door of the hotel lobby over to his left. He was sure that the two were looking in his direction as they talked. Huggins and Craigie spotted him before he reached the sidewalk. They wore their guns.

"Hi-yuh, Ben. How's things look to you 'round here?" Huggins asked.

There was an expression of restrained excitement in Ben's eyes which his men recognized. "Pretty good for the first race, boys," he replied in low voice. "The Sugar Bowl Valley is on the auction block at three o'clock and we're going to bid our last cartridges for it, but we got to keep quiet about it till the bidding starts. The sheriff is on our side, but don't want it leaking out that he is."

He told them in full detail what had happened since he left them. Watt Craigie's freckled Irish face beamed at the promise of possible tumult for his trouble-loving nature. Jase Huggins just spit tobacco juice and swallowed, looking serious.

Ben went on: "Orkin and his man Joe are in the hotel front now. Maybe waiting for us and cooking up something. They sure didn't want us to come in here to be around for the auction, not after I asked about buying the Sugar Bowl. Let's take our personal packs up to the room, then we'll have the horses shod and stabled."

When the three men, carrying their dufflebags, walked through the lobby, Orkin and his man had disappeared. In their big room they deposited the bags, washed their hands and faces and combed their hair before the washstand mirror. They meant to have a good restaurant meal after caring for their horses.

Jase Huggins had removed his gun and belt to put on a clean shirt. He

didn't put the gun on again, but hid it between mattress and springs of his bed. He had a ready answer to Craigie's criticism.

"A man out'n a gun on in any town like this is a lot less apt to find trouble than him that's wearin' one," he said. "I'm a man o' peace till I'm tromped on, and they ain't likely to tromp on me where there's a sheriff clost by like Ben talked about."

Ben Boston knew there was wisdom in the old cowboy's reasoning, but he also had seen many men wearing guns on the street and he remembered Sheriff Lemming's hint of a feud between him and the town marshal with the latter being an Orkin man. He wavered a moment, then decided that he and Craigie should keep their guns on.

They went downstairs and passed Joe on the hotel veranda. Joe didn't acknowledge Ben's faint smile of recognition. Ben saw his eyes glancing down at his and Craigie's guns and wondered why his glow of satisfaction faded when that roving inspection found no gun on Jase's hip. Ben was sure that he read impending trouble in Joe's manner, but why had the fellow seemed disappointed instead of glad in the absence of Jase Huggins' gun?

Craigie and Huggins rode their saddle horses and led the pack animals across to the blacksmith shop. Ben went around the sidewalk and met them there. It was arranged to first stable and feed the horses, then the blacksmith was to put shoes on all of them during the afternoon.

At a crowded restaurant counter they ate a hearty beefsteak dinner, finishing off with pie and big urn coffee, delicacies they had long gone without. Ben was on edge for three o'clock to come, looking often at his watch while they ate. It was a quarter after two o'clock when they left the restaurant and started back toward the hotel. Ben had decided to change his clothes before appearing at the auction. A man came along the street and stopped to address two gun-wearing cowboys lolling at the edge of the board walk in front of the restaurant.

"Better shuck them guns, fellers," the man advised. "This buck marshal's gone and stuck up a notice 'gin wearin' guns. It's over there on the hotel front."

BEN BOSTON almost failed to hear that cautiously spoken warning, for it was not intended directly for him and Craigie. He was going on several steps before the man's words sunk into his consciousness. Instantly he saw the hidden hand of Barr Orkin in this order against gun-toting. It was obvious that the order against wearing guns in Escolante was a new one, put out for a special reason.

"You fellers hear what I did?" Ben asked as he stopped and looked at Jase and Watt. His jaws were set and there was a cloudy look in his dark gray eyes. Both men had heard and said so. Their eyes silently questioned Ben.

Ben said: "Jase, you hop over to Sheriff Lemming and tell 'im what's up and tell 'im Watt and me are going on to our room to drop our hoglegs, plumb peaceful. But let Lemming understand we're looking to him for protection, for we'll most likely need it plenty. We'll wait for you in the room."

"Good 'nough," Jase agreed. "See't you git there out'n being jumped on the way."

Jase sloped off straight toward the court house. Ben, fully alert, but with pretended unconcern, stalked on across the street to the hotel block, Craigie at his elbow, blue eyes wide with expectancy. Nothing happened on the way. They stepped onto the hotel veranda, which was a half foot above the sidewalk. Ben nodded Craigie's attention to a white piece of paper tacked to the hotel door-facing. There was writing on the paper in large, hand-printed letters. Ben went cold with certainty of trouble when he read:

"OFFICIAL WARNING: AFTER TWO O'CLOCK TODAY, SATURDAY, MAY 5, ANY PERSON WEARING FIREARMS ON HIS BODY INSIDE THE CITY

LIMITS OF ESCOLANTE WILL BE ARRESTED AND FINED TWENTY-FIVE DOLLARS AND COSTS.

"GORDON SUCHER,
"CITY MARSHAL."

Ben looked at his watch and showed its face to Craigie. The latter whistled softly. It was twenty minutes after two. Together they started through the open door into the lobby. Two men closed in on them from each side, guns in their hands.

"You gents just seen the notice," the man with the very black moustache at the right of Ben said. "You're under arrest. Put up your hands!"

CHAPTER IV

BEN BOSTON looked quickly around at him who gave the hands-up order. He saw a bright metal star on the man's coat lapel. The star bore the legend: City Marshal. The man was well dressed and handsome, in a dark, cold-eyed manner.

"We heard about that notice 'crost the square," Ben said, lifting his hands shoulder high, "and come right over to shuck our guns in our room. Why not give a little leeway? That notice wasn't up when we left the hotel less than an hour ago."

The marshal took Ben's and Watt's guns before he answered.

"You can tell Judge Coffey all about that," he replied in a calm, quiet way, like a man talking about the weather.

"How quick can we get it over with?" Ben asked. His blood was running cold with suspicion.

"You're as full of jabber as a skunk is of stink," the marshal replied. "Turn 'round and march." He put a hand on Ben's shoulder and shoved him out of the door, then to the right toward the corner. "Bring the other'n, Hensley," he ordered his companion.

A score of people stopped and stared at the grim procession. The two prisoners passed a Chinese laundry, a cheap lunch room, a vacant lot and were forced ahead up three steps into a stone building that was square, low and flat-topped.

Immediately inside the door was a room filling the width of the building, with many chairs set in rows. At the left end was a low platform, a high judicial desk and chair set within a surrounding picket fence waist-high. This was the city judge's room, Ben surmised, but there was no one in it. City Marshal Sucher was pushing him on across the room to an iron lattice-work door in the back wall.

He and Craigie were to be jailed without a hearing or chance to pay their fines, until after the auction!

It was clear to Ben now what was back of this. Barr Orkin was clever and ruthless, but this realization did nothing to lessen Ben Boston's suddenly storming rage. Against the sudden impulse to whirl and drive his fist at his captor came quick flashes of reasoning. Gordon Sucher was unquestioningly a quick, nerveless killer, or he wouldn't have the job he filled. It wouldn't hurt Orkin's conscience if these two prisoners, especially Ben, himself, were killed while resisting an officer. If Orkin would go to such lengths because of the mere hint of competition in the scheme to possess the Sugar Bowl Valley, he would go much further in case of defeat in his first objective.

"Get on over there to the right and stand with your back to me," Sucher ordered while he shoved Ben farther.

Keys rattled back of him, grated in the lock. Very well, he mustn't give them reason to kill him and Craigie. Maybe he could later find a way to even scores with Barr Orkin and his good friend, Gordon Sucher.

"HEY, Ben!" Watt Craigie's alarmed voice broke in from behind on Ben's silent rage. "You see what they're drivin' at, don't you?"

"Plain as broad daylight," Ben replied, suddenly afraid that fiery young Watt Craigie might go ber-

serk. "Keep level, Watt. I've got things fixed outside so this don't mean nothing like they think."

"What you meaning by that, feller?" Sucher demanded as he shoved the door inward and seized the back of Ben's collar. "Get on in there! So you've got something cooked up outside, huh?" He pushed Ben along between two widely separated rows of steel cells. "Maybe your bunch is all set to rob the bank. We'll see about that."

"What's the use of putting on that sorta mask, Sucher?" Ben asked while he walked along as directed. "You were told to keep me from attending the auction sale of Sugar Bowl Valley."

Sucher ignored Ben's remarks and spoke to his assistant. "Put that feller in this cell and snap the lock, Hensley," he ordered.

Ben saw an apparently drunk man lying on the bunk in the cell he was passing, the cell that would be next to Watt Craigie's barred niche of confinement. Sucher pushed him through the open door of the next cell and pulled the sliding, doubly cross-barred door shut. A heavy snap lock clicked into place. The drunk prisoner was between Ben and Craigie. Sucher and Hensley went back out the front without any further talk.

"Guess they're gonna look for Jase," Watt Craigie called over to Ben. "You all right, Ben?"

"Yeah, but don't spend any talk that ortn't to be overheard," Ben answered.

"Why, is there some others in here?" Craigie asked.

"We got company between us," Ben clarified. "With all them empty cells acrost the way there, they pick the only one with a gink in it to straddle us over."

"Uh-huh," was Craigie's only response. He fell silent for a long time.

Ben wondered why Sucher hadn't searched him and taken his bank book, money belt and other personal possessions. After thinking about that for some time, he could only surmise that Sucher and Orkin—he never wavered in his belief that Orkin was back of it—believed that their purpose would be fully accomplished by going through their pretense of holding the prisoners for gun-toting.

After Sugar Bowl Valley was auctioned off to the one and only bidder for whatever price he felt like giving, above the sum of taxes due, Ben and his cowboy would be taken out, fined and turned loose.

Ben sat down, trying to relax with the thought that Jase Huggins was free and would do something when he learned what had happened.

Wise and easy-going old Jase! They couldn't arrest him for gun-toting. But they could find some other excuse, manufacture one, of course! No, they wouldn't need to do that to Jase. He, Ben, was the one they wanted out of the way—unless they thought Jase was equally in the market for Sugar Bowl.

THERE was a long silence. The man in the next cell was either dead drunk, sound asleep, or still playing that he was. After a while Craigie broke the silence.

"You cain't think yourself outa this hole, Ben. What time is it?"

Ben looked at his watch. "Ten minutes to three," he answered.

"Three o'clock and it'll all be over," Craigie philosophized with an audible "Ho, ho, hum," pretending to yawn. "I hope the rope don't hurt our throats none 'fore we drop. Think I'll have a smoke." After a little he spoke again in jerks as if he was licking the cigaret paper. "We'd orta go—further west, anyhow. Lucy'd find you—too easy here."

"Leave Miss Bollinger out of the talk, Watt," Ben commanded irritably. "I may wish yet I'd listened to her."

There came a stir outside. Ben jumped up and leaped across to the cell door, seizing the bars to steady himself and listen. Loud voices had suddenly burst into the little court room in front as if the outer door had been slammed open.

"I'm tellin' you, Sucher, you cain't get away with this!" the sheriff's

raging voice shouted out there. "If Judge Coffey don't come here and let them prisoners out in five minutes, I'll tear this damned little hoosegow down!"

"Now, see here, John," Marshal Sucher spoke smoothly, unruffled, "you know you're shooting off fool steam. You get on out so I can lock these two gun-toters up just like I done to them two you're bellyaching about. I'm not gonna open the jail door till you're out of here, for you're not responsible in your—"

He broke off as the faint sound of the outer door's opening came to Ben's anxiously attuned ears.

"So, here you are, Barr Orkin!" Sheriff Lemming exploded. "I knew you was in on it. You'll not get away with it!"

"Get away with what?" Orkin demanded in a louder, less controlled voice than his friend, Sucher, used. "It's time for the auction to open up, Lemming, and you're not there. I came to look for you. What are you sweating about?"

"You know what I'm drivin' at, Orkin," Lemming said in lower, more menacing tone. "You had your little squirt of a city marshal here arrest two men for totin guns, something that ain't never been done in this town before. You done that, Orkin, to slip over a dirty deal. You didn't want no competition in bidding for the Sugar Bowl, so you trumped this up to get rid of the only competitor you'd have. Make Sucher turn Ben Boston and his man a-loose, Orkin, right now, or I won't go on with that auction till he does!"

"OH, YES, you will, Sheriff Lemming. I don't know a thing about this squabble you've got here with Marshal Sucher, but I do know that you publicly advertised the auction of the Sugar Bowl for three o'clock today and I filed my intention to bid with you. If you don't go through with the auction on time, I'll enforce my bid by law and take the Sugar Bowl at my own price.

"Hey, damn you, Orkin—"

The sheriff's voice was cut off by the slamming of a door. Smothered laughter from the court room reached Ben's ears and he knew that there were several voices joining in the merriment.

The front door of the jail clicked and opened. There was quick suppression of the low jesting and muffled laughter.

"You two bozos get in there," Sucher was ordering, "and don't abuse my kindness in letting you have the run of the jail. The judge will be around after a while."

The door clicked shut and Ben understood that Sucher had left his two new prisoners loose in the jail passage, with a free run of all the space outside the cells.

"You see that he gits here mighty soon," one of the new inmates snarled at Sucher. "This is a hell of a come-off, arrestin' plumb peaceable men for totin' guns in a town that's always been wide open since the Morms left."

"It's a new city law that I didn't make, but I'm seeing it's carried out from now on," Sucher replied. "Come on, Hensley." Two pairs of steps went out to the street.

The two new prisoners wandered back, inspecting the place, and came first to Craigie's cell.

"What'n hell!" one exclaimed. "Here's a feller locked in. You must be tough, pardner, bein' locked in clost thisaway. What'd you do?"

"Same as you fellers, no more," Craigie replied resentfully. "Didn't he lock you in for gun-totin'?"

"Sure. That's all. Soon's Judge Coffey comes, he'll turn us loose, that is, if we can pay the fine."

"Why worry on that point?" Ben asked from his cell door, sharp sarcasm in his voice. "Orkin'll juggle your fine and pay you your stinking wages to boot."

"What you talkin' about, feller?" the big man demanded, hostile. It was he who had talked to Craigie.

"I mean that Sucher's and Orkin's little setup with you two dummies isn't pulling any wool over our eyes," Ben replied coolly. "You was put in here to make our arrest look half honest, maybe to see what you could pick out of us, like this supposed

drunk in that cell was meant to do." He nodded toward the next cell.

"Well, I'll be damned!" the big man roiled suddenly. "Fer a busted nickel I'd tear this door down and spank you! You hear what he said, Bangy? You hear what the uppity cuss made out that we was?"

"Yeah, I heard 'im," Bangy, the short one, declared. "You jest let 'im be, Marlin. We'll see what he says to our faces when we all git out—iff'n he ever gits out."

HE TURNED away toward the front, strolling lazily. Marlin stood closer to the cell door trying to see Ben clearly.

"I'll know you when I see you outside, feller," he finally said. "I'll make you swaller your words."

"It's a pity," Ben told him, "that I won't ever be able to forget your map. It's about the ugliest this side of hell."

Thirty-three minutes passed and Ben began trying to force out of his mind the memory of Sugar Bowl Valley. He tried to forget the herds of fat, blaze-faced muleyheads he had mentally pictured on those grass-covered fifty thousand acres, with his brand on their sleek hides.

By now the auction was over; Barr Orkin was grinning in greatest satisfaction and would probably have the poor grace to come and show that grin to Ben. At last he threw himself at full length on the hard bunk boards and shut his eyes.

CHAPTER V

WHEN Jase Huggins left Ben Boston and Craigie he walked more hurriedly than he was in the habit of doing. He dodged some incoming cowboys as they dashed around the corner of the continuous line of hitching poles surrounding the courthouse yard. He ducked under the pole and went along, looking backward to watch Ben's and Watt's movements. A high tuft of the uncut grass under the trees caught his toe and he nearly went sprawling. He caught himself after three lunging steps, bent over.

He stood up straight then, stopped and faced toward the hotel, waiting to see if anything happened to his friends before they could get in to their room. He saw them reading the notice, wondered why Ben took out his watch and showed it to Craigie.

"W'y don't the tarnation fools git on to their room!" Jase groaned. He spit a long stream of tobacco juice on the grass without removing his eyes from his dallying friends. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down nervously.

He saw them start inside at last, then saw the two men confront them with guns in their hands. A glint of light on the marshal's official star told the dumbfounded old cowboy that what he had anticipated was now happening. He tore off his big hat and slapped at his long legs.

"Gee-willigens, damn it all!" he swore his worst profanity in sudden desperation. "Now somethin's gotta be done!"

He stumbled on toward the front steps of the courthouse, still looking backward. He hesitated at the steps just long enough to see Marshal Sucher put his hand on Ben's shoulder and start him out on the hotel veranda. Then he whooped and rushed up the steps, dashing into the sheriff's office like a crazed bull.

"Where's the sheriff?" he shouted. "Where—who's the sheriff here?"

The three astonished men in the office jerked loose from their several tasks, looking at Jase as if they had just heard a cry of murder. One of them came toward him doubtfully as if he feared a wild, dangerous man was loose in the place. Stammeringly he spoke, waving a hand toward the east of the courthouse.

"He—he's just went over to the bank," this fearful man in white shirtsleeves informed. "He'll—"

Jase didn't wait for more. He had observed the bank building when Ben was telling him and Craigie about depositing his money. He ran with long, awkward strides like a high-heeled, oldish cowboy always does on the rare occasions when he has to substitute for his horse. People along

the way stepped out of his path, some smiling after him, others with a stare of curiosity.

SHERIFF JOHN LEMMING was a cautious man. He was extremely happy that Barr Orkin would have competition enough to make him go his limit in bidding for Betty Lee's Sugar Bowl lands, but he was not going to be caught in a hole with no turn-around. He went across to the bank and had just finished putting a question to President Blynn when Jase Huggins leaped into the courthouse.

"Sure, John," Blynn confirmed, "that boy's certified check is genuine. It's the same as if he'd put forty thousand here in cash gold. If he bids the whole forty thousand, you take my word for it, it's good. And say, if you see Orkin in time, you might tip him off, for he only has a coverage in here of about twenty-five thousand. He wasn't expecting to have to go that high, not that I don't want young Boston to get the Sugar Bowl if he wants it, but—"

"Yes, sure, sure, Blynn," the sheriff broke in after some quick thinking. He had almost sworn angrily at the banker's suggestion, but caught himself in time. Blynn might find other means of notifying Orkin. "Yeah, if I see Orkin in time, I'll—"

He cut off suddenly. A long, gangling figure in hurried flight across the square drew the attention of both men. A two-horse buggy team on the street reared in fright, hoofs beating the air, as the tall, thin man dashed in front of them, his arms waving a time beat with his shouts. Sheriff Lemming heard the strange man's yell: "Hey, sheriff!" and dashed out to meet him on the sidewalk.

"What's eatin' you, feller?" he demanded, seizing the excited cowboy's arm when Jase would have run past him into the bank. "I'm the sheriff. Where's the wholesale massacre at?"

"Oh, sheriff—you the sheriff?" Jase wailed, breathing hard. "Was you the sheriff with Ben Boston when he put forty thousand dollars in this bank while ago?"

"Yeah, damn it, man, toot your horn lower. You're tellin' the whole county. There ain't no other sheriff here but me and I saw that check deposited by Ben Boston. What's happened? Spill it easier."

"Ben and Watt Craigie's jest been lariated in 'crost there at the hotel—looped for totin' guns—hogtied and run off to jail I guess, 'fore they had a chanct to shuck their guns after—"

"What! What the devil you talkin' about, man? They ain't no law here 'gin totin' guns, not since I let everybody tote their guns to be ready for stick-uppers after this bank was robbed three year back! Now who's looped—"

"But, sheriff," Jase howled, "it musta been the marshal—this town marshal. I heerd somebody sayin' there was a notice up agin gun-totin' and—"

"Come on!" the sheriff commanded, bristling. "There's a skunk in this pot."

He loped out across the square and came up to the hotel front still running. Jase Huggins split the dust at his heels. The sheriff halted abruptly before the hotel entrance and glared at the hand-printed notice tacked there, warning against wearing guns. He cursed and reached out a long arm, tore the sign down and strode into the lobby. The dandified clerk sidled in behind the counter, looking his surprise at the angry law officer.

"Did Sucher arrest two men here for gun-totin'?" Lemming demanded of the clerk.

"Yes, sheriff. He just took them 'round to the hoosegow," the clerk confirmed, looking very innocent.

"Where's Barr Orkin?"

"Couldn't prove it by me, sheriff, I ain't—"

"Aw, of course, you ain't seen 'im and you don't know, Pick Mansell, that Orkin's back of this. Where's Biff Davis? He been around—. Aw, hello, Biff. Come over to my office, quick."

A MAN of about forty, wearing city clothes, with a derby hat on the back of his head, had arisen from a chair in the lobby at mention of the Biff Davis name. Davis had been practicing law in Escolante for

several years before the tidal wave of gold seekers brought in half a dozen new legal lights.

"Sure, John," Lawyer Davis agreed, dropping a well-chewed toothpick.

"Naw," Lemming said, starting toward the door, "we better go up to your office where we can talk private."

Huggins was close after the sheriff, but hesitated when the latter mentioned talking privately to the man with the derby. Jase wasn't the kind to poke in where he wasn't wanted. Lemming looked back, quickly conscious of Jase's lagging.

"Come on, feller!" he bellowed. "You want 'em grabbing you off, too? Stick close to my stirrup, cowpuncher." Jase followed, very glad to do so.

They went east to the middle of the block and hurried up a flight of stairs leading to a second story over the hardware store there. Davis unlocked a door and Jase found himself in a room with walls lined by law books.

Sheriff Lemming threw on a table before Davis the torn piece of paper which he had removed from the hotel doorfacing. "Before I go techin' off some dynamit 'round here, Biff," he said, "I want to know if Sucher can make that legal 'gin my orders."

Davis inspected the notice and thought for a half minute before looking up at the hard-breathing, expectant sheriff. At last he cleared his throat and spoke.

"Since the town council appointed Sucher and delegated to him full authority to keep peace inside the town limits, I'd say, off-hand, Square John, that he can make it legal."

"You're on the town council, Biff. Did you know he was gonna do this today?"

"Not a bit of it, Square John. In fact, ever since you made it a wide open gun-toting town after the bank robbery, I've had increasing good reason to approve your action in doing so. Now, with the gold-hunter crowds coming in, I guess Sucher—"

"Naw, Biff," Lemming interrupted like a puff of gunpowder. "This is Orkin's doin's, just put up for today to get a special lariat on some men that Orkin wanted out of the way for a spell."

He sat down in front of Davis and explained th case as he saw it and his conclusions were very nearly the same as Ben Boston was figuring out at that same moment inside the city jail. Jase Huggins sat down in an armchair, temporarily forgotten by the other two.

AT LAST Lemming finished his explanation. Davis looked over at Jase Huggins, nodded toward him and asked:

"How does this man here come in? Are you a friend of this Boston fellow?" He kept his eyes on Jase, waiting for an answer.

"Sure, I'm Ben Boston's top hand. Been with him and his old dad since Ben was knee-high to a grasshopper."

"Think Boston would give you a power-of-attorney to act for him at this auction?" Davis asked.

"Sure, whatever that is," Jase confirmed quickly. "I know Ben would give his right eye for that Sugar Bowl Valley north o' here. I never seen a man go so crazy 'bout a patch o' country in my life like he done this mornin' when he fust seen it. He's come all the way from east Colorady intendin' to buy it when he heard it was to be tax sold."

"What's the use talkin' 'bout a power-attorney for this man?" Sheriff Lemming growled. "Why cain't you get Boston outa jail on one of them haybees corpuses writs, Biff?"

"Mightn't have time, Square John. We'd have to find County Judge Hawthorn and take time to explain the case to him. That would take long past time for your advertised auction. And as it's a city misdemeanor case, Judge Hawthorn mightn't assume jurisdiction. Better let me make out the power-of-attorney for this man, then you go see Boston in the city jail, if they've got him there, which is quite certain. Have him sign this with you as witness, then you'll be all set. This man can bid as Boston's representative."

"All right, make out the paper," Sheriff Lemming said. "If it works, we'll tie Barr Orkin in a knot he

cain't undo with all his pretty white teeth."

"It'll work, all right," Davis assured, turning to his desk and fumbling for papers, "provided, of course, that you get Boston's signature."

The paper was drawn giving Jase Huggins power-of-attorney to bid for the "undersigned" in the auction of Sugar Bowl Valley.

But Sheriff Lemming failed to get Ben Boston's signature. When he and Jase Huggins rambled hastily down the street and ran into Gordon Sucher and his man, Hensley, at the hotel corner, these latter were escorting Marlin and Bangy toward the jail. Lemming told Sucher, with an effort at self-restraint, that he wanted to see Ben Boston in the jail.

"You've got 'im in jail down there, haven't you? That tall man and the redheaded feller you snagged at the hotel while ago?"

"Yeah, I corraled two gun-toters like that, John," Sucher replied, smiling. He knew Sheriff Lemming was wearing tight harness on his feelings.

"All right," Lemming said, with foreboding quietness, "I've got to see that tall feller right away."

They were nearly to the jail steps.

"You and nobody else'll see them bozos, sheriff," Sucher said, becoming cold of eye, "not till Judge Coffey comes to try 'em."

He was driving his two prisoners up the steps. Hensley opened the door for them.

"Where's Judge Coffey?" the sheriff demanded, ready to explode.

"You might go hunt 'im, Mr. Lemming. I'm not his nurse."

THAT WAS when Sheriff Lemming burst into the jail front after Sucher and his prisoners, all restraint gone, shouting his threats to tear the jail down. Jase Huggins stuck close to the irate sheriff and was perfectly willing to help demolish the building as long as it was to be done by official orders. Barr Orkin came in and the short, snappy argument about the auction followed the sheriff's accusation of Orkin's complicity in the arrest of Ben Boston. Orkin stalked hurriedly out, on his dignity.

"Hey, damn you, Orkin," the sheriff dashed out in pursuit, "you think you're just about boss 'round here, but you're not bossin' me. You've gone and bogged yourself in deep this time."

Orkin halted ten steps from the jail front and faced about at the furious old man. Jase Huggins, built on lines similar to the sheriff, stuck close like his shadow.

"Listen to me, sheriff," Orkin said quietly, "I'm not aiming to butt into your affairs, not as long as you stick to your lawful duties as sheriff. When you don't do that, I might have a little to say about us getting a new sheriff here. Think that over, too."

He started to whirl about and go on, but his glance fell upon Jase Huggins and he hesitated.

"When you think you're big enough to run the elections in this county, Orkin," the sheriff blasted, "just pop your whip. I heard plenty talk how you salted mine claims and sold 'em to poor suckers here lately and they's lots of other stink comin' from your direction I'm gonna be smellin' out soon. You've put out your horns at last and I'm lockin' with you for the show-down. Come on, puncher!"

He threw the last words over his shoulder at Huggins and started to leave Orkin behind. Orkin seemed not to have heard the sheriff's challenge. He was studying Jase.

"Wait a minute!" he ordered. "Who is this man tagging with you? He was with them other two and he wore a gun when he come into town while ago—wait a minute! I'll see Sucher about this."

Lemming was going on toward the courthouse square with long, fast strides. Jase Huggins was racing with him.

"Go on, see your little town wrangler boy!" the sheriff flung back without turning his head. "We can durn well hold that auction out'n you around!"

"Oh, no, you can't!" Orkin shouted and came on at a trot.

At the hotel corner Sheriff Lemming and Jase turned down the walk toward Biff Davis' office. Orkin went out across the street to the courthouse. He made a motion with

his left hand and two men, wearing guns, stepped away from their positions against the hotel wall and followed him. One of them was his man Joe. The other was a little wiry, dark man.

At the foot of the stairs that led up to the lawyer's office Sheriff Lemming looked at his watch, then glanced across at the more than usual crowd gathered about the courthouse entrance. It was ten minutes after three. He was in a quandary, wanting to see Davis, but afraid to delay the auction beyond a reasonable time limit. He saw Orkin and his trailing satellites. Then turned him out toward the courthouse. Jase started to follow, then stopped, gaping along the sidewalk ahead, his mouth open, eyes wide with incredulity. Three beautifully dressed young women came toward him. Each bore a dainty silken parasol as protection against the warm, white May sun. They were talking and laughing as they strolled along.

SHERIFF LEMMING stopped twenty steps out in the middle of the street, aware that his shadow had deserted him. He whirled around angrily and shouted.

"What's the matter with you, puncher?" he called. "Come on here. I ain't through with you yet. Get a move on!"

"Jase Huggins!" the middle one of the three girls cried, looking into Jase's face for the first time. She stepped ahead of the other girls and extended a white-gloved hand to Jase. "You men finally got here, I see. Father and I came over by train and stage several days ago to visit with friends here and see his gold mine. Where is Ben?"

"I'll be a hog-tied yearlin' if it ain't you, all right, Miss Lucy!" Jase gulped, rubbing his long throat with his left hand while awkwardly taking Lucy's hand with his right. "I couldn't believe my eyes. Gosh, I bet Ben'll sure be glad to see you!"

Lucy Bollinger's smiling eyes glowed more brightly at Jase's words. "But where is Ben?" she demanded again. "I heard that he was in town."

A shot of panic came over Jase's boney-cornered face. He swallowed. His Adam's apple trotted up and down. The sheriff came back to him, growling between his impatient, short greeting to the young ladies with Lucy.

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss," he told Lucy, "but this man and me's got mighty important business to 'tend to quick. Cain't this talk wait till later?"

"But where is Ben Boston?" Lucy insisted. "You looked so funny, Jase, when I asked about him. What's happened?"

Jase saw the sheriff start to answer and lifted both hands shoulder high, shaking them futilely at the sheriff.

"You know Ben Boston, Miss?" Lemming asked. "Aw, sure, I forgot. You're the young lady that come in town the other day with her daddy to put up with the Blynns. Ben Boston's been throwed in jail by some hyeeners here today, that wanta keep 'im from biddin' for a ranch that's up for auction and that he wanted mighty bad. That's what I gotta have this man for, quick. He's gonna bid for his boss in that auction."

"Oh, good heavens!" Lucy Bollinger exclaimed, horrified. "Ben Boston in jail! That's ridiculous!"

"But sheriff," Jase wailed, "we ain't got Ben's signatoor on that paper. We cain't—"

"We gotta take a chanct," Lemming snapped, growing more impatient after a sideways glance across at the growing auction crowd. "We may get bogged up over our ears, but if Ben Boston don't back you up, I'll gun-whip 'im from here to Jericho. Come on!"

CHAPTER VI

SHERIFF LEMMING tried to pull Jase Huggins off the sidewalk and in the direction of the courthouse. Lucy Bollinger caught Jase's arm, her brilliant eyes afire with excitement.

"Wait a minute, Jase! Wait, Mr. Sheriff, please," she cried.

"Cain't do, Miss," Lemming denied

her plea inexorably and pulled Jase on through the dust, forcing the determined girl to follow. "This here auction is past due now. Ain't no tellin' what devilment'd be done if I don't hold it legal."

Lucy held to Jase Huggins' arm, her parasol dangling from her wrist, and walked along with the men. She turned her head and called back to her friends.

"I'll come on later, girls," she told them. "If father has returned, ask him to come down here right away."

"Where is your father, Miss Lucy?" Jase Huggins asked, half stumbling under the sheriff's pull and Lucy's drag on his arms. Hazily he thought of Banker Bollinger being a source of help in this emergency.

"He went out to the mines this morning," Lucy said. "He promised to be back to the house in the early afternoon. Tell me about Ben, Jase, and what this trouble is."

They reached the scattered rim of the crowd. Men were asking the sheriff when the show would start. Barr Orkin and his two men, still wearing guns, stood, somewhat separated, at the right of the courthouse entrance. Orkin talked in low tones to a third man. Jase bent his head to answer Lucy.

"Come on in my office," Sheriff Lemming told Jase and turned loose his arm, then spoke to the crowd. "I'll move a table out here and start the auction in just a minute. Where's Betty Lee? Ain't she come in yet?"

He looked around the crowd and wound up with a glare at Orkin.

"Miss Lee told me this morning," Orkin declared, "that she didn't want to hear the auction held. She said—"

"But I changed my mind, Mr. Orkin," a quiet, girlish voice spoke from behind some men in the doorway.

A young woman stepped out in full view in the middle of the wide doorway then as men parted to give her space. She was about five feet, six inches in height, but her high Stetson and trim, straight figure, dressed in dark green khaki riding breeches and shirt, with high-heeled brown cowboy boots, made her look taller. Her features were tanned by much riding in the spring sunshine, but they were regular in a plain way, with the velvety softness of a girl in perfect health. Her dark eyes, looking straight across at Barr Orkin from under long, black lashes, sparkled like flames.

"Mr. Orkin tried to get me not to come, sheriff," she went on, "but Buster and I decided to get it over with more quickly than by sitting out there, waiting in suspense."

"I merely advise you, Betty—" Orkin began, embarrassed, but Sheriff Lemming cut him off.

"NEVER mind, Orkin," he snapped. "I know very well what was on your mind. You've got lots of gun-toters to fight for you 'gin men fighters, but you knew they couldn't fight a pretty girl's eyes while she watched you half steal her ranch. Come on inside, folks. Come in, Betty. We'll have that table out here and get the thing over with pretty quick."

Orkin swelled and started to give the sheriff some retort, but changed his mind, only glaring out at some of the crowd who sniggered behind their hands. He looked uncomfortable, but held his position while he removed his hat and ran fingers nervously through his straight, sandy hair.

Lucy Bollinger and Betty Lee exchanged quiet, appraising glances as Lucy came up the steps. Neither seemed impressed with the other's very different manner of dress.

"She's a plain little thing, but with plenty of fire," Lucy whispered at Jase Huggins' ear.

"Gosh, she's a cowgirl from a honest-to-God cow country, if I ever seen one," Jase Huggins confided in reply, stalking inside after the sheriff and Betty Lee, admiring the latter's easy, graceful stride.

Buster Lee stood inside by the wall, still wearing his goat-haired chaps and cowboy hat. He jumped out toward Jase when the latter came through the door.

"Hello, there, Mr. Cowpuncher!" he cried. "You come in with Ben Boston this morning. I remember you. Where is Ben Boston?"

"He'll be 'round, son," Jase told him. "I 'spect he'll be right glad to see you again, too."

"Go on, Jase," Lucy begged, ignoring the boy. "Just why is Ben in jail and what is this all about. Tell me now, quickly, can't you?"

The sheriff and Betty Lee disappeared into the right-hand office.

"Let's git inside the sheriff's office, Miss Lucy," Jase advised.

"Aw, gosh," Buster Lee complained, turning away from Jase to slouch against the wall again, "nobody thinks I'm worth talking to. I'll show 'em sometime." He frowned at a man who stood over him, grinning patronizingly.

Jase shut the sheriff's office door behind him and began in stumbling haste to tell Lucy Bollinger the high lights of what had happened to Ben and the preparations for the auction. The sheriff called to him once in the midst of his talk, then in a minute called more irritably from inside the railing of his office.

"Come on here, puncher," he commanded. "Have I gotta get me a prod pole to move you along? Give me that power-attorney paper and listen to me a spell."

JASE led Lucy in toward the sheriff and Betty Lee, finishing his explanation while he fished the paper out of his hip pocket.

"I was a-tellin' Miss Lucy what's took place here, sheriff," he explained. "This is Miss Lucy Bollinger, sheriff, daughter of Mr. Horace Bollinger that was Ben Boston's banker over to Antelope Springs, Colorady. Mr. Bollinger is out here with Miss Lucy."

"What!" the sheriff exclaimed with sudden surprise. "W'y ain't you said so before, you blunderin' cow wrangler? Glad to meet you, Miss Bollinger." He turned around and strode two steps away, whirled and came back to his desk and looked at the paper Jase gave him. "We gotta go on with this like I been figgerin' on. No time to do elsewise. Hey, you fellers," he turned about toward his office assistants. "Get that table outside and set it just below the steps in front and have them tax deeds to the Sugar Bowl out there with you."

He looked at the paper Biff Davis had prepared, then scowled.

"So you're Jase Huggins," he looked up at Jase from under his shaggy, graying eyebrows. "All right. We ain't a-gonna commit no forgery, tackin' on Ben Boston's name to this, but you and me both done heard Boston swear high as the moon how he meant to bid for the Sugar Bowl and he told me plain that he'd bid up to thirty thousand dollars forit. He's got his bid covered regular over to the bank. Now, you get out there and when I call the biddin', Orkin'll open up pretty low. You keep clear of any ruckus his men'll prob'ly want to start with you and lift the bid a few thousand each time Orkin lifts his, up to twenty-five thousand. I got reason to think that's his limit. If he bids more'n that, you cover his ante every time up to thirty thousand. You got it straight, now?"

Betty Lee's face had gradually lighted with pleasure as the sheriff spoke.

"Why, sheriff," she cried when he finished, "who is this Ben Boston? Buster has been talking about him all day. Do you really mean there'll be honest, fair bidding for the Sugar Bowl?"

"Sure, Betty," Lemming replied without taking his bushy-browed glance of inquiry from Jase Huggins. "Ain't had no time to tell you. Just set tight, girl. Old Square John ain't let 'em steal your spread yet."

Jase mopped his high, red forehead.

"I ain't got no gun, sheriff," he complained, "and them crows o' Orkin's that are standin' 'round out there with cannon danglin' handy ain't jest there to look purty. Give me a gun and keep that town marshal offa my neck."

Lemming puffed his moustache with a snort. "No use invitin' trouble, Huggins. They daren't start nothin', you unarmed and me right there over you. Just stand over t'other side from 'em—"

Lucy Bollinger interrupted the sheriff. She had been quiet, but busy thinking. Betty Lee looked less plain

and simple when she spoke of Ben Boston a little while before. If her face glowed and her eyes sparkled that way before she had even seen Ben, what might be the course of things after she had seen him?

"Mr. Sheriff," she broke in, stepping up before the sheriff's desk, "please let me help. If there are men out there who might make trouble if Jase does the bidding, then let me offer Ben's bids. Ben is an old and very dear friend and I would like to help him. Besides, if there's doubt about his backing up the bids as you are afraid of, I'll promise that my father will guarantee the bids. Jase knows he can."

LEMMING looked worried at that. It put him in a spot hard to wiggle out of. He saw the shadow of complications. Slowly he had come around to the wish that Ben Boston should get the Sugar Bowl. Bankers horning in might not be to Ben's liking. Betty made it harder to wiggle out of the loop Lucy had thrown.

"I think that is very sweet of Miss Bollinger, Square John," Betty approved, smiling across at Lucy. "It will save trouble and worry for you on two counts. Please let her do it."

The two office workers struggled with the table, trying to get it out of the door.

"Hey, don't knock that door off its hinges gettin' that table out, you awkward pen-riders!" Lemming shouted. "Dang it all, turn the thing catterwise!"

He stood up, frowning. He avoided Lucy's pleading eyes as she leaned with both white-gloved hands on his desk. Jase gulped, silently anxious.

"All right," the old sheriff agreed roughly. "Let's get out there. Maybe it'll give Barr Orkin a stroke, or somethin', havin' a pretty girl bid agin him and I'll be much obliged to you, Miss Bollinger, if you slay him outright. You heard me tellin' Huggins how to run up the bids. Think you can ride it out?"

"Sure I can, Mr. Lemming. I've been to other auction sales."

"You look like a plumb capable young 'un, all right," the sheriff admitted with grudging admiration. He hoped this pretty girl wouldn't get ropes on Ben Boston that Ben didn't like if the bids she put in were successful.

The table had been successfully maneuvered out to the ground below the courthouse steps. The sheriff came out and looked over the crowd, his ill-tempered scowl deeper than ever when his glance passed over Barr Orkin and his hovering gunmen. If Gordon Sucher hadn't started his false campaign against gun-toters, the sheriff would have made these men discard their guns for the duration of the auction, but he found peculiar pleasure now in showing up the one-sided activity of the town marshal. Sucher had been talked of as the next sheriff.

Lemming took his place behind the table.

"GENTLEMEN," Sheriff Lemming opened up in a high falsetto, unlike his usual booming tones, "there ain't no use my tellin' what this business is about. You've seen it announced over there on the public notice board for more'n two months, 'cordin' to law. I only had to sell out three properties for taxes in this county since it was organized and this time it jars me worse'n if I was throwed on a rock heap by a mean outlaw mustang, but it's gotta go through.

"Gentlemen, the bids for Sugar Bowl Valley and the East Mesa grazing rights clear over to Ute Canyon are now open official. The startin' bid's got to be enough to cover the county and state taxes, which amount to four thousand, three hundred and forty-eight dollars and thirty-nine cents. I have the old deeds here, made out thirty year ago for the Lee-Johnson Purchase Syndicate and I've got the tax sale deed all ready to be signed over to the successful bidder. All right! Do I hear a bid?"

Barr Orkin stood up, said: "I bid five thousand dollars, sheriff!"

"Very generous!" the sheriff boomed, returning to his every-day, natural tones. "The man wants a hun-erd thousand dollar property for

a meazly five thousand! Do I hear a higher bid I forgot to mention, gentlemen, that four hundred and sixty-odd fat beeves go with the Sugar Bowl, besides the finest house and corrals in the whole San Juan country and over two hundred head of fust rate cow ponies. And, gentlemen, fifteen thousand muleyheads wouldn't graze down all the rich grass in the Sugar Bowl and on the mesa. Come on, gents—and ladies!"

He took off his big hat and bowed first to Betty Lee and turned to do the same toward Lucy Bollinger standing above and back of him. They were the only women in the crowd. Many eyes had searched out Jase Huggins' ungainly, lanky form where he tried to efface himself in the corner, for he was a newcomer in town and the whispers had said a stranger would bid against Barr Orkin. The little dark man below Jase looked up at him with slitted black eyes, rocking almost imperceptibly on his toes and heels, letting right hand rest lazily near the butt of his big gun.

Sheriff Lemming threw his hat on the table and snatched out a striped bandanna to mop his forehead, then intoned, an angry note in his voice: "I'm bid five thousand! Do I hear another bid? First call! Do I hear a higher bid? Second call! Come on, bid!"

The crowd stood on its toes. Jase Huggins chewed his tobacco cud feverishly and swallowed. He straightened up and looked at Lucy Bollinger in suddenly rising panic. Had the girl lost her nerve? Sheriff Lemming looked around at him and called loudly, more angrily, that the third and last call was about to come. Barr Orkin was looking across at Jase with a steady gaze. Jase saw the amused, confident smile on the man's face. Joe, down below Orkin's position on the veranda, laughed. Lucy Bollinger, cool and loving the dramatic, waited till the last second. She began swinging the parasol again slowly.

"The last call!" Lemming shouted and took both hands to the bandanna, mopping his head and face of sweat. "Do I hear another bid? Going! The Sugar Bowl is going for that measly five thousand dollars! Last chance! Do I hear one more bid?"

Betty Lee gasped and looked up at Lucy Bollinger, sudden anger in her glance. Jase Huggins looked down at the black-eyed little man and prepared to bid.

"Gosh!" Buster Lee cried into the momentary hush. "I wisht Ben Boston was here. I bet he'd bid fifty thousand dollars."

CHAPTER VII

LUCY BOLLINGER loved to play on the very rim of danger.

She knew Sheriff Lemming was about to collapse; she saw with darting, laughing eyes how Betty Lee flashed anger and Jase Huggins prepared to offer the bid she withheld; she beheld Barr Orkin's calmly certain complacence and took time to anticipate the shock she was about to give to that easy complacence. When Jase Huggins, ashen-faced with panic, started to speak, she at last relented. She stopped swinging her parasol and spoke.

She called out lightly: "I bid six thousand dollars, Mr. Sheriff, in the name of Ben Boston."

An exploding stick of dynamite in the midst of that crowd would have lifted it scarcely more than did Lucy Bollinger's words. Somebody on the fringe of the crowd cheered with a whoop and nearly everybody else joined in. This drowned out notice of the first wild-eyed, galvanic jump which Barr Orkin executed.

Orkin had been watching Jase Huggins when Lucy started to bid. His gaze snapped over to Lucy. He had sat down on the railing again, puffing at his cigar. He jumped up and angrily threw the cigar away, lifting his trembling right hand as he shouted at the sheriff through the din of the crowd's cheering.

"I protest that bid!" he yelled, walking over nearer to the sheriff. "I protest that bid! It's not genuine, sheriff, and you know it. I insist

that my first bid still holds as the only legally qualified bid!"

Square John Lemming's drooping moustache trembled and shook; he glared at Orkin and pounded on the table for quiet, turning his excited face to the crowd.

"Quiet down, you folks!" he shouted at the crowd. "This ain't no Fourth of July blow-out!" He turned back to Orkin when the cheering wilted to a softened murmur again. "Who's runnin' this auction, Barr Orkin, you or me? I happen to know that the young lady's bid is genuine and plenty legal. I'm callin' for another bid. Do you or anybody else here want to raise the bid of six thousand? I'm bid six thousand for the Sugar Bowl!"

Orkin steamed and fumed; his face became whiter than usual and perspiration came upon it as freely as it had drenched the worried sheriff's long face a little while before. He tried to glare his rage across at Lucy Bollinger but saw her smile of enjoyment and the sparkle in her eyes which said plainly that she was laughing at him. His hand shot out as he shouted his bid:

"Seven thousand!"

"Ten thousand!" Lucy Bollinger countered instantly, never losing her smile.

The crowd was thoroughly captivated by that smile and as much amused by Barr Orkin's growing fury. Another burst of cheers and rollicking laughter shook the court house and brought people running from four sides of the busy square. The crowd swelled in size like a summer thunder storm. When the sheriff had shouted himself hoarse quieting the crowd again he was angrier than ever. His usually smooth, down-drooping moustache stood out like a brush heap.

"This is a serious business," he yelled at the crowd, "and you folks are here tryin' to make fun out of it. I'll arrest and jail the next man that starts a holler! Now, I'm bid ten thousand for the Sugar Bowl. Ten thousand dollars! Do I hear a higher bid?"

"Eleven thousand!" Barr Orkin shouted.

"Fifteen thousand!" Lucy called.

Men jumped up and down out in front. There was much slapping of legs and rough nudging of neighbors by frenzied elbows, but no one dared to disobey the sheriff's injunction against cheers.

"Sixteen thousand!" Orkin snapped. He whirled around in a complete circle, fingering in his vest pockets for another cigar. He saw Marshal Sucher coming up to the edge of the crowd on the west and signalled frantically to him.

"Twenty thousand!" Lucy replied.

Orkin was stooping over the veranda railing, saying something to Sucher. Sheriff Lemming, after a few moments of relaxation and enjoyment of the lifting bids, looked around at Orkin. A snarl shook his disarrayed moustache when he saw Gordon Sucher. When the latter started away hurriedly the sheriff glared suspiciously at Orkin.

"Twenty thousand dollars I'm bid!" he shouted. "Who'll make it twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"Twenty-one thousand!" Orkin called, but the strength of his rage was going out of his voice. He sat on the railing and found another cigar to light.

"Twenty-two thousand!" Lucy bid.

ORKIN bit off and lighted his cigar calmly while Lemming called the bid for the third time and threatened to close with the last bid. Orkin was plainly holding out for time and the sheriff was aware of that, even before Jase Huggins crept over to his side and whispered in his ear.

"That skunk, the town marshal," Jase grumbled fearfully, "jest took a order from Orkin for devilment 'gin Ben Boston. We better hurry and head 'im off, sheriff."

"I'm gonna wind this shennanigans up in just thirty seconds!" Lemming shouted, hoarser than ever. "Twenty-two thousand is bid. Who'll bid twenty-five—"

"Twenty-two thousand, five hundred!" Orkin offered.

"Twenty-five thousand!" Lucy Bollinger lifted quickly.

"Going for twenty-five thousand dollars!" Lemming declared in a ragged, weakened voice. "A second time, going for twenty-five thousand dollars! The third and last time, going for twenty-five thousand dollars!"

"Wait a minute, sheriff!" Orkin came alive again, lifting both hands. "I'll raise that bid plenty, but I've got to see the bank. Give me five minutes to see Blynn and I'll sure raise the bid. I demand this as only fair to Miss Lee and her little brother."

The sheriff frowned, rubbed his suffering throat, looking his distress.

"Betty," he said, glancing down at Betty Lee and Buster, "it's up to you and Buster. It's not just legal to hold up a fair bid this way, but I don't believe Ben Boston is the sorta feller to split hairs over that with you. What d'you say?"

"I want Ben Boston to win!" Buster Lee shouted. "Come on, Betty, let Ben Boston have it, then we'll go in cahoots with 'im if he'll let us. He's a great feller, Betty, he sure is!"

"I don't want any favors for us, Mr. Lemming," Betty said. "If it's not legal to hold up the bid for Mr. Orkin, please don't do so for us. It isn't fair to the high bidder."

"That settles it, Orkin," the sheriff turned triumphantly on Barr Orkin. "The Sugar Bowl Valley and the East Mesa grazing rights over to the Ute Canyon is hereby declared sold in legal tax sale auction to Ben Boston for twenty-five thousand dollars, and a heap of thanks to Miss Lucy Bollinger, Ben Boston's pretty bidder."

He turned and bowed to Lucy. She smiled at him and lifted a dainty, gloved hand in salute to the cheering mass of people. Barr Orkin stood irresolute for a moment, seeming about to come over and speak to Lucy, but changed his mind when Lemming, Huggins, Betty Lee and Buster crowded around her. He went away, followed by Joe and the little dark man.

"You sure handled it fine, Miss Lucy," Lemming commended. "I was 'bout to blow up and die when you waited so long, but I guessed you wanted Orkin t' think it was all set for him."

"Sheriff!" Jase Huggins wailed, crowding in. "Ben Boston is bein' done dirt to right this minute, I bet. Cain't you tear loose from here now and lope over to that jail?"

"Good jeeminy crimeny!" Lemming cried in his hoarse voice. "You bet we'll lope over there. Come on!"

He grabbed Jase's arm, then shot out some quick instructions to his office assistants concerning the table and papers. Betty Lee, Lucy and Buster were all asking questions at once about Ben Boston. Jase began to tell them of Marshal Sucher's coming and going during the auction, but the sheriff cut off his recital.

"Come on, Huggins!" he ordered. "Let's go!"

THE crowd was scattering, going back to the sidewalks.

"But I want to go along," Lucy Bollinger cried, running down the steps after the sheriff and Jase. "I—"

Buster Lee cut off Lucy's plea as he ran in front of her to grab Jase's hand and cried: "We gotta see Ben Boston, too. Come on, Betty, Le's all go. Where is Ben?"

Lemming shouted over his shoulder: "All right, come along as far as the city court room. Trail us. We gotta run!"

Buster Lee ran ahead of his sister and Lucy Bollinger to keep up with the sheriff and Huggins. His rippling long-haired goat chaparejos seemed to be the larger half of him. Dozens of curious-eyed people around the northwest corner of the square and in front of the hotel watched the pair of hurrying men and the running boy. They saw them come to an abrupt halt at the hotel corner.

Ben Boston and Watt Craigie hurried around the corner and nearly collided with the running sheriff and tall cowboy. Both were mad, Ben in a quiet, tight-lipped manner, while

Watt Craigie was cursing a blue streak when he saw Jase Huggins.

"Damn 'em, they kept our guns!" he shouted his foremost thought at Jase. "Where's your gun, Jase? Let me—"

"What the blazes you fellers doin'—" Jase checked his headlong gait and started to shout down Craigie's curses.

Ben stood wordless, his storm-cloud of quiet anger departing before a less darksome look of amazement; Watt Craigie was more vocal and spoke his awe as if he saw a ghost.

"My good gawsh!" he said slowly. "If it ain't Miss Lucy Bollinger, Ben, sure's I'm a—"

Whatever Craigie was going to proclaim himself to be went unheard, for Lucy broke the sudden silence which had quieted the storm at the moment of her appearance.

"Ben Boston!" she cried, seizing Ben's hands while her sparkling eyes glowed up at him with happy excitement. "Don't look at me as if I had come from the grave! Father and I just came on a little ahead of you to see about his mine out here. You remember, I told you about it and about the Blynns, our friends here. Are you all right, Ben? I heard they had you in jail and I was so worried."

"Lucy!" Ben spoke at last and Betty Lee, coming close, could hardly hear his words. "I'm right honestly glad to see you, girl. Yes, a slimey snake had me chucked in jail to keep me from bidding for that ranch I told you about." He looked lugubriously at the sheriff. "I guess it's all over, sheriff, and that skunk, Orkin, got away with it."

His bitter words were more a statement than a question.

"Don't go givin' up like a cow in a bog-hole, son," Lemming advised, his usually austere, heavily browed eyes carrying a pleasant twinkle. "This is Betty Lee, Ben Boston, and this is her little brother, Buster. You've just bought out their big Sugar Bowl Valley spread, and you'd better back up your buy!"

"Huh?" Ben grunted, his eyes spreading wide, flashing from the sheriff to Betty Lee's smiling face, uncomprehending. "I don't get you, sheriff. Ah—howdy, Miss Betty." He took off his big hat and accepted her proffered hand, acknowledged her greeting.

"Hello, Ben Boston," Buster Lee pushed in beside his sister, grinning up at Ben. "Don't you 'member me?"

Ben glanced down at Buster and put his left hand on the enthusiastic boy's shoulder. "Hi-yuh, Buster. Sure thing I remember you, 'cause nobody'd forget a real cowboy like you so soon, but maybe you see the joke that's making these other folks spread their faces so wide. What are they saying about my buying your ranch, Buster? Put me hep, pardner."

BUSTER grinned his ecstasy at this confidence and waved a hand toward Lucy Bollinger. "That nice lady bought our ranch for you, Ben Boston. She give twenty-five thousand dollars for it—a lot more'n Betty thought we was a-gonna get for it. You'll let Betty and me stay on as pardners, won't you, Ben? I want to be a sure 'nough cowboy, like you."

Ben Boston seemed not to hear the last of Buster's excited pleadings. The twisted little smile of bewilderment left his lips and a dark scowl lay across his sun-tanned features. He looked at Lucy Bollinger and spoke with slow, quiet vehemence while Lucy's eyes opened with greater astonishment than had been on his face a moment before. He said: "So, Miss Bollinger, your dad's money is still working for you! Well, I hope you enjoy ranching in the Sugar Bowl."

He stepped past Betty Lee and the sheriff, going toward the hotel front, calling over his shoulder to blank-faced Craigie and Huggins.

"Come on, fellers. We're traveling outa this country!"

"Ben, stop!" Lucy cried and ran to seize his arm. "You don't understand! You've got to listen, Ben!"

He would have shaken loose from her hold, deaf to Sheriff Lemming's

and Jase Huggins' hastily mingled explanation, if he had not come face-to-face with Barr Orkin. The latter shoved his way through the gathering circle of curious onlookers. He stopped in arm's reach of Ben, his cold, sweeping glare taking in those with Ben and coming to rest on Ben's angrily glittering eyes.

"I guessed there was crookedness in that deal," he said. "So you didn't authorize this girl to act as your representative in bidding for the Sugar Bowl!" There was vindictive triumph in his voice as he slid his glance on to Sheriff Lemming. "I guess my first bid in the auction stands as the winning bid, eh, sheriff? Or do you want to stand prosecution for mishandling a public auction?"

Lucy Bollinger jerked at Ben Boston's arm and whispered furiously at him while Orkin spoke his gloating threat to the sheriff. "You're a hot-headed fool, Ben Boston. The sheriff asked me to bid for the ranch in your name. You've got to back it up!"

Ben pushed Lucy slowly and firmly away from him while his gaze fastened on Barr Orkin's triumphant smile.

"I s'pose you'd better guess again on that, Mr. Orkin," he said. "Miss Lucy Bollinger was my regular bidder with full authority to represent me in the Sugar Bowl auction. Does that satisfy you, Mr. Orkin?" He put out his right hand to make Lucy get farther behind. There was tense significance in the gesture.

"But I just heard you say enough to show you didn't know anything about it," Orkin replied hotly, losing his smile.

"The only thing I didn't know about 'round this town today when I come in," Ben said, "was the low-down rattlesnake that runs part of it and strikes without shaking his rattles like all decent rattlers do. Mr. Orkin, you sort of admire having plumb peaceful citizens arrested and roped into jail for wearing guns in a town where most everybody wears 'em, and holding 'em in jail long enough to keep 'em away from where you don't want 'em, then spanking 'em with a twenty-five-dollar fine in a hurried-up trial and turning 'em loose, don't you?"

He dropped his right foot back to brace himself. His long arms dangled at his sides, but his fists were clenched and there was a slight tautening of his tall, straight body. Watt Craigie whispered excitedly to Betty Lee: "Look out! Somethin's gonna happen in 'bout two seconds!"

Orkin looked around back of him in a quick, apprehensive glance. Joe and his small, dark companion were wedged in back of the packing crowd.

"I don't know a thing about why you were arrested," he said less belligerently. "I had nothing to do with it, if that's what you mean."

"I like a liar less'n I like a rattleless rattler!" Ben gritted out and struck like a bolt of lightning, all his great power back of his flicking, smashing right fist.

CHAPTER VIII

BEN BOSTON and Watt Craigie were in their hotel room waiting for Jase Huggins—and further trouble. Mysteriously, that further trouble was slow in coming, if it was to come at all. Ben had bathed and was putting on clean clothes while he waited for Marshal Sucher to come and arrest him for assault and battery on the person of Barr Orkin.

"Talk 'bout me bein' a hot-headed fool!" Watt Craigie moaned from where he sprawled in physical comfort and spiritual misery on his bed. "You sure yanked Old Lady Luck's tail hard right when she was doin' a mighty good turn by you. I wonder if they got a chain gang for the town convicts here?"

"Oh, dry up!" Ben advised. "If I have to hand this town another fine, it'll be cheap pay for the pleasure I got out of it."

Ben was smiling as he adjusted the tie he sometimes wore on special occasions. He had been to the courthouse with Sheriff Lemming, signing necessary papers and recording the deed which made him owner of the Sugar Bowl Valley.

"But what'll that nice little lady, Betty Lee, think o' you now?" Craigie went on. "When they picked ol' Orkin up, so helpless and his left eye a-swellin' and bloodshot that way, she jest stood stiff and looked at you like she thought— Gee, I wonder what she thought o' you then?"

"What's that to you? I hardly had a look at the girl. What is she like?"

"Mighty purty, in a quiet sorta way. Not real beautiful all over like Miss Lucy, but them eyes! They're dark and sad and make you feel funny lookin' at you from behind them long lashes o' hers."

Craigie grunted and sat up on the edge of the bed, staring at Ben for a moment. "Say, Ben! I got a notion. You still gonna let Jase and me be small pardners with you?"

"Sure thing. The Bowl and the mesa will support a lot of cows. What's your notion, Watt?"

"Jase's got 'bout three thousand saved up. I got my little twelve hundred bucks in the old belt, 'nough to buy a hun'erd muleyheads if we can find a seller. You got uppards o' fifteen thousand left, ain't you?"

"About eighteen thousand. Lope on. What're you driving at?"

"You couldn't put in more'n fifteen hun'erd cows on the Sugar Bowl grass with that jackpot, holdin' back 'nough to run us. Added to what cows Miss Betty's got left, there'd be less'n two thousand head where we could fatten ten thousand or more. I heard the kid beggin' Miss Betty to ast you for a pardnership. If they'd put their twenty thousand in the pot, we oughta start with near twice as many cows. In three-four years we could breed up near the limit o' the range."

"YOU'RE growing a cowman's head on your shoulders, Watt, or at least it's sprouting. I've been thinking over all that, only I figured to get a loan at the bank. We've got to keep plenty cash on hand to hire good men and buy supplies, which supplies won't all be groceries and saddles. Some of 'em will be hardware."

"Guns? You mean guns and such, Ben?"

"Guns and ammunition. Whoever's been milking the Sugar Bowl in the past have found some slick way of draining out the cows from behind them walls of rock. We gotta find the drain place and then we'll burn some powder. The same gang will figure to milk us dry so we can't pay the taxes, like they done to Miss Lee's father and to her. I hear her dad died two years ago, leaving her still with near three thousand cows. When she went to round up some to sell for tax money and running expenses she found just a few hundred left. We'll need the old bunch and plenty guns."

"You mean you'll get your old wranglers over here with us, Ben?" Craigie asked with sudden enthusiasm.

"I know where ten or twelve of them are, scattered from Montana to Mexico. Maybe they'll come. They promised to, if I ever called 'em."

"Good gosh, Ben! I know they'll come if you ast 'em. The old bunch'd ride through hell for you. Let me go round 'em up."

"No need. You'll have plenty to do here. I'll ride up to Purvis, on the railroad, and send telegrams, or mail 'em letters where no telegrams'll reach 'em."

Craigie yelled in a spasm of joy, forgetting where he was as he leaped into the air, whirling, shouting: "Whoopee! What fun we're gonna have!"

A wild pounding came upon the locked room door, jerking Ben and Craigie around, tensely expectant. They heard Jase Huggins' excited voice. Ben let the long-legged old cowboy in and re-locked the door.

"What'n blue blazes busted loose in here?" Jase demanded, staring from Ben to Watt. "I thought you was fightin' somethin'."

Craigie told him why he was yelling. Jase lost his heavy look and seemed very happy at the promise of gathering with his old riding partners again. Ben asked him what was going on in town.

"It's gittin' late in the day," Jase

began, "and the out-o'-towners is movin' home'ards. Miss Lee and the kid and that puncher we seen out there this mornin' done pulled out from the stable half hour ago. Said they'd be 'spectin' us out any time we wanted to come, Ben. Orkin and half a dozen hombres strung 'long out the west way that I heerd leads to his Oh-Kay spread. The sheriff says that marshal skunk is settin' in on a poker round over to the Whizz Bang 'crost the square."

"Didn't you see Miss Lucy around any more, Jase?" Ben asked.

"She run into them two Blynn girls while you was at the courthouse. I forgot—that is, I ain't told you she said you'd have to come and apologize 'fore she'd ever speak to you again."

Ben looked worried, leaning against the foot of his bed while he gazed at the floor.

"Oh, I forgot somethin' else," Jase went on. "The broncs is all shod, purty and clean."

BEN started up. He seemed to have made a decision. "I'll be forking Skillet for a gallop out to the Sugar Bowl. You fellers hold the fort here—see that nobody comes mosing 'round our room and things."

He put on his hat and started toward the door. "Did the sheriff get our guns from Sucher like he promised," he asked Jase.

"Yeah, Ben. He says you and Watt can have 'em and wear 'em in town, or out. Says he had it out with Sucher and there ain't gonna be no more monkey business 'bout gun-toters. Plenty of 'em 'round the square 'fore I come up."

"Come on, Watt," Ben said. "Let's get our guns from the sheriff, then you come back here with Jase. You fellers stick pretty close to the room and if I don't get back tonight, don't get skittish. I might stay at the Sugar Bowl if Miss Lee has accommodations for me, tomorrow being Sunday."

He and Craigie went to the sheriff's office and claimed their guns from Sukey Magee, one of the sheriff's deputies who had returned from the mines and was there alone. Ben left Craigie and went to the stable, saddled Skillet and asked the way to Mr. Blynn's house.

A few minutes later he tied Skillet to an iron ring in top of a low post before Banker Blynn's fenced, wide yard and big, painted two-story frame house. A half dozen women sat in a circle of chairs on the wide, banistered south porch. Ben saw Lucy arise and come around toward the front steps. He went in along the graveled walk.

"Hello, Lucy," he greeted. She came slowly down the steps.

"Hello, Ben. Did you have trouble finding the house?"

"Nope. It's right on my way out to the Sugar Bowl. I'm going out there now."

"Will that Miss Lee be out there?" There was a reserve in Lucy's manner which he understood.

"I've come to apologize, Lucy," he said, overlooking her question. "I was a terrible clod up there this afternoon, but I was half crazy thinking over what'd been done to me and not knowing the truth about what you'd done. It was real kind and a mighty brave thing that you did to help me get the Sugar Bowl. Whatever our other differences, I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful."

"What are our other differences, Ben?" She stood directly in front of him, her eyes dark with questioning anxiety or hurt.

"I'm a cowman and you're a town-loving girl, Lucy. I guess now I'll live out my life raising cows in the Sugar Bowl."

"And marry some plain little cowgirl thing like Betty Lee."

"I never even noticed how she looked. Watt Craigie said she looked pretty horrified at me when I knocked Orkin over. I guess she'll be clearing out soon's she can move their personal things."

HE WAS on the point of telling her that he meant to offer Betty Lee and her little brother a partnership interest in the Sugar Bowl, but changed his mind. Maybe Betty Lee would scorn his offer and that would

make necessary another unpleasant explanation.

"Won't you come in and meet the folks here?" Lucy asked. "I want you to know them."

He glanced at the sun, low in the west. "It's getting late and I've got a long ride out to the Sugar Bowl. Please make my excuses for this time, Lucy, and let me lope along. How long will you and your father be here?"

"Are you anxious for me to leave?"

"Not by a whole lot, girl. I wish you folks lived out here. It would make this more like the old home country."

"You may have your wish, for a while, at least. Father says the big claim he owns a half interest in is very rich and needs lots more machinery to work it. He has spoken of taking a house here for a few months, anyway, and having mother come out."

"That would be right nice," Ben said. He glanced again at the sun and added: "I'll be mozeying on to the Sugar Bowl."

"When will you invite me out to see your wonder ranch?" Lucy asked when he made a half turn to go.

He looked at her studiously, trying to fathom the depths of her questioning eyes.

"Would you really want to see it?" he asked.

"If you don't invite me, I'll ride out some day uninvited."

"You oughta see the whole valley when it's as pretty as it was when I first laid eyes on it from the east mesa rim. Let me get set out there first. I'll be pretty busy, here and yonder, for a spell, getting the lay of things and running in stock. First I'll have to find stock to buy, and round up some good riders. This will be a bigger spread than my father's old Barbee-O, counting in the ten by fifteen miles of east mesa."

"You may be a very rich rancher yet, Ben, if you can keep the rustlers out. I've heard the talk around here of how the cattle just faded out of the Sugar Bowl right through the high walls of rock they say surround it."

"That's one thing I'll be busy on—finding that fade-out place. Cattle don't walk off like ghosts. So long, Lucy. Tell Mr. Bollinger I'll be right glad to see him."

He went out to Skillet and loped away along the street to the next turn leftward, swung over to the Sugar Bowl Valley road and headed north. The sun was an hour high above the lofty cliffs of rock in the west. He wanted to reach the Sugar Bowl ranch house before darkness settled upon the valley.

LONG before coming within sight of the ranch house, Ben saw a bunch of about one hundred cattle being hazed along northward on the east side of the river. Three riders drove the small herd. One of those riders circled down nearer the river once and expertly headed four straggling cows up to the herd, then that rider left the herd, coming back toward the river and Ben at a gallop. When only the river separated him from the rider, he recognized Betty Lee. The road he followed was on higher ground, fifty yards back from the stream. Betty found a fordable place, plunged her mount in water much above its knees and quickly splashed out on the west shore. Ben had already turned off the road to meet her.

"Watt may be right," he thought, "and she's not as pretty as Lucy, but she sure can ride pretty, and she knows cattle."

He lifted his hat in returning her friendly, "Hello," and his glance went past her to the driven herd. It was a conscious effort of his to avoid seeming to gaze at her strikingly graceful figure as a rider. He had decided that she was more pleasantly noticeable in a saddle than she had been in her riding togs on the streets of Escolante. But she read a question in his glance toward the herd.

"I thought you would be coming out soon, Mr. Boston," she explained. "We'll try to have all that are left of our herds in the corrals by tomorrow and hold them till you take over."

"You sure ride like a real cow-

puncher, yourself, Miss Betty," he declared.

BY UNSPOKEN agreement they started their horses along, side by side, at a walk toward the ranch. The setting sun, hidden by the high walls and mesa top in the west, still cast it's red glow upon the face of the eastern cliffs, painting them in vivid vermilion, reflecting a soft light upon the whole valley.

"I used to ride to school in town five days a week," she said. "I love to ride, but it has been mostly work the last two years."

He saw her look up at the splendor of the eastern cliffs and noted the firmly clenched, sun-tanned jaws and the sadness of her face. Being at her left side, he noticed the long sweep of her black eyelashes and remembered Watt Craigie's remark. Watt had said those lashes and her sad, dark eyes were her main claim to beauty.

"Can you tell me anything useful about how you think your cattle have been disappearing?" he asked. "I've heard some things."

She took her gaze from the distant, sun-brightened cliffs and looked at him with a smouldering glint of anger in her eyes as if the first full flame of fury had burned low in her futile, long battle.

"If I, or the sheriff had known anything useful to do, we might have saved the Sugar Bowl. My father once hired four extra riders, after his cattle began to disappear, and put four of his oldest, most trusted men to night riding. They watched the two cuts up to the east mesa and kept a close guard on the south end of the valley, but five hundred of our best cows disappeared that year. Father died the next year. I had just come of age and took over management of the ranch. Had to let all our help go except Harry Pike, the foreman, and Mrs. Mester, our cook and housekeeper. I owe them a year's wages I'll pay up now, thanks to you."

"Who is that riding the herd with Pike?"

"Buster. He's so crazy in love with cowpunching, he'd stay out of school if I'd let him. I've been trying to make up my mind to take him back east and educate him for a business career, but I'm afraid he would never forget this country."

"You don't think much of this country, then?" Ben said.

She did not answer at once, but swept her gaze slowly around from the shadowed cliffs under the western sunset halo, onward past the far away northern curve of mesa heights to the eastern, miles-long panel of gigantic rock walls. Those colored walls, a thousand feet high, were blood red now in the last glow of the dying day.

"I love it," she said. He saw her lips tighten on the words.

"Then why not stay on here, Miss Betty? I've just gone through the misery of giving up a place I've loved all my life."

She looked swiftly around at him. A new light lessened the sadness in her questioning eyes.

CHAPTER IX

BETTY LEE let her horse take ten paces while she studied Ben's face thoughtfully and finally demanded: "How could I possibly stay on here, now, when this is no longer my home?"

"Maybe after my foolish act with Orkin today, you wouldn't want to make yourself and Buster partners with me here."

She thought for a moment, then seemed to ignore his offer of a partnership. She said: "Orkin deserved more than you did to him, but you were very foolish to do what you did. It makes it twice certain that you'll have trouble here."

"I don't like guessing who my enemies are. It's a lot easier when they stand out where I can see 'em plain. Orkin would've gone around making out he was friendly to me. I read his brand different."

"He might have been less dangerous as your friend."

"Not as a two-faced one. Is he your friend, Miss Betty?"

She was silent while the horses padded along the soft valley road and the saddles creaked. After a long moment she spoke.

"Is a man a girl's friend when he wants to marry her?" she asked.

"Oh, so that's it! And he offered just five thousand for this rich spread. I thought twenty-five thousand was a mighty shameful low price."

"Maybe he's just a hard-driving businessman and you are not, Mr Boston. I suppose he thought it was a way to make sure of my answer—make sure it was like he wanted."

"Business and love—all samee with Mr. Orkin, huh? But you don't lo—. Aw, beg pardon. That's none of my business. Well, I guess you're not interested in a partnership for you and your little brother. One of my punchers thought of it when I said we'd have to get a bank loan to help out buying stock for this range."

"I don't have a full say as to Buster's share of the money you paid us. The county judge and the sheriff are trustees with me of Buster's interest here. We might lose it all. What makes you think you can do any better here than we have done?"

"I'll soon have a dozen or fifteen good men in here as riders. We'll find that leak and put a crimp in whoever's been milking the Sugar Bowl. Cattle don't walk off through mountain walls."

"My father and Sheriff Lemming have said the same thing, but they couldn't stop it. It has come to be the ghost story of this country."

"I'll bust that ghost if I have to put a man to nightwatching every bunch of cows we have in the Bowl, and I'll go over every inch of breaks in the rocks around this valley."

"You sound like you mean it, Mr. Boston. I hate to think of being a quitter, although I was pretty badly beaten when I rode into town today. I was ready to think I had stuck it out too long. If I throw in with you, it would be good because I want to see the ghost rustlers whipped and wiped out."

The glow from the mesa walls revealed to him the firmness of her jaws and the tight lines of her lips. At that moment she seemed less feminine than she had been with her sad, reticent manner a little while before. Certainly she was miles apart from the white, spotless beauty of Lucy Bollinger. From what she had said he guessed she was about twenty-three years old, but her two years of heavy responsibility and battle here had matured her more than she had a right to be. Ben suddenly realized that he was pitying her for what she might have been and was not.

"I don't want to persuade you against your better judgment, Miss Betty," he hedged. "I'm offering it partly because I feel like the price I paid for your ranch holdings here was too small and because I thought you and Buster would love to stay on here in your own rights."

"MY FATHER and his first partner, Nels Johnson, just paid the Government ten cents an acre for the fifty-six thousand acres below the walls," she explained by way of easing his conscience, "and three thousand dollars for a thirty-year lease on the seventy-thousand-acre east mesa. The mesa lease has ten years yet to run."

"And if we can stock it up to its easy limits, we can be marketing five thousand head of beef a year off it. I still say I got it too cheap. When will you have your mind made up about my offer?"

They were coming to the ranch house. Its great colonial bulk, the shading cottonwood trees and the vast establishment of barns, long bunkhouse and corrals down eastward made many dark shadows in the evening dusk.

"What is your offer?" Betty asked.

"Half and half, if you and Buster put in twenty thousand to buy stock with, and let me hire and handle the rider help."

"That's too generous. A third interest would be fair. We aren't beggars, or Indian wards."

"Have we gotta go over the argument again, Miss Betty? Half and half. I don't like bad dreams over my business dealings."

"You may be foolish, but you're a square shooter and very hard-headed,

Ben Boston. Let me have until Monday to see the Judge and Mr. Lemming. You will stay here tonight, won't you?"

"If you have plenty room and your cook don't mind feeding a heavy eater."

"Mrs. Mester will like that, and you can have your pick of three extra bedrooms."

Together they unsaddled their horses in the long, high barn, with its many horse stalls below and hayloft above. After caring for their horses they walked over to the big cow corral, where Betty opened the wide south gate in readiness for the small herd being driven in, then she guided Ben over the rest of the well-equipped establishment her father had built. The long, L-shaped quarters for the hired help had a kitchen, dinning room and comfortable bunks for a maximum of forty-five men.

"This place sure was built for a big spread," Ben commented, well pleased.

Betty said: "Ten years ago we had over sixteen thousand cattle, three hundred horses, two crew cooks and forty riders. There are four line camps around the mesa. Most of the cattle were grazed up there from June till October, leaving the grass in the valley to cure in the sun for winter feed."

"From what Orkin said this morning, I gathered that there're not many ranches nearer than fifty miles down the San Juan."

Betty looked perplexed as she gazed into Ben's face through the half light of dusk.

"There are several big outfits," she explained, "some nearly as big as the Sugar Bowl, within thirty miles of Escolante. Some of those cattlemen were at the auction today. They have all been having some trouble, not all at once, but first one, then the other loses a few hundred head. Mr. Beckett, owner of the Running W over east of Ute Canyon told me just before I left town that he would see you about joining their Association."

"SOUNDS like the 'sleeper' rustler gang's tricks that played hob with Wyoming and Dakota cattlemen for some years. They've been pretty well caught up with and cleaned out of Wyoming. Maybe some of 'em bunched up down this way. I'll be glad to see Mr. Beckett. Is Orkin a member of the Association?"

"Yes. He lost about three hundred cattle in one run-off not long ago, but found them a week later down across the Arizona line."

"Did they catch the rustlers?"

"No, they got away ahead of the posse."

"Miss Betty, 'cording to what I heard today from a man who oughta know, if anybody in this country should know, I figgered there's some suspicion against Orkin. Do the other ranchers trust him?"

"Some of them don't like him, personally, but I believe they think he's honest. He's a shrewd, hard businessman, one of the most successful in this big country, even if he does gamble some."

Ben dropped the subject then, failing to notice Betty's casual reference to Orkin's gambling. He wondered what personal feelings had to do with Sheriff Lemming's opinion of Barr Orkin and Gordon Sucher. Lemming was obviously an old-time cowman, while Orkin and Sucher were of a different school. They would as naturally strike sparks in contact as steel and flint would.

BEN TALKED with Harry Pike and Betty Lee in the big front room of the house until Mrs. Mester called supper. Harry Pike was apologetic for the manner he had shown Ben that morning.

"O' course," he explained, "I had no idea you was lookin' for this place to buy it, or I'd a acted different. I thought Orkin had it sewed up and in the bag, knowing what I did. I sure didn't think he'd have the nerve to bid just five thousand first shot. I hope you won't hold it 'gin me."

"Sure not, pardner," Ben told him. "I guess you'll be a lot of help to us, getting the lay of things 'round here, if you'll stay on at puncher's wages,

at least for a while. I'll be rodding the spread, myself, personal."

Betty rested in a chair while the men stood talking.

"I guessed you'd be doing that," Pike agreed, "and I'll be right glad to stay on like you say and help. I know every foot o' the Bowl and the mesa."

"Are you sure there's no break in the Bowl's sides up north or on the west, none whatever besides the two that I heard are on the east mesa side?" Ben asked.

"There's a few mighty steep cuts—maybe half a dozen—what a man could navigate on a tough, sure-foot cayuse, but cows could no more be pushed up 'em than they could be pushed to the moon."

"How does this river get down into the valley?" Ben demanded.

"Comes in through a narrer gorge at the east side of the north end and tumbles down over a fifty-foot fall 'bout a hundred yards up the gorge from the main wall line."

"Not a chance there to drive cattle out, eh?"

"No more'n if you could drive 'em up over them Niagry Falls the easterners talk about."

Ben enjoyed his sleep that night in the luxury of a highposter bed. He awoke once in the middle of the night and slipped out upon the small front balcony to enjoy the sight of his new home in the soft light of the moon. Around the high west walls rimming the valley out in front of him, miles away, the shadowed places set off the silvered patches of light on the out-jutting slabs and colonnades of the rocks. Those rocks had been hewn into fantastic shapes by wind and rain through immeasurable ages of time. He wondered if Lucy Bollinger could see this glory land as he saw it and ever again prefer towns and soft, hand-made pretty things.

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK Ben and Buster rode up the valley. It was another perfect, sun-filled day. The thick bunch grass on the fertile low ground near the river had already grown knee high to the horses in many places. Ben saw that he could harvest plentiful stacks of hay for winter feeding. That thought reminded him of the small bunch of riding stock he had seen in the corrals. He asked his young companion about the Sugar Bowl's horse cavvy, remembering that the sheriff had mentioned a large number of cow ponies during the auction according to Jase Huggins' report.

"We didn't put up so much hay last year," Buster explained, "and Betty didn't want no more of our horses strayin' or gettin' stole from the valley, so she let Mr. Beckett and Mr. Tom Krutch take 'bout two hun-'erd head to keep for us and use 'em just for their feed."

For a long distance the man and boy rode northward without sighting anything except about two dozen cows with young calves. Buster, chattering his astonishment early at not finding more cattle, guided their course to the higher ground under the eastern mesa walls. From the more elevated vantage point they could see nothing but a few more of the cows and calves. At the first trail cut leading to the mesa, the one down which Ben and his companions had come the day before, they found no sign of passage since Ben's own horse tracks had been made twenty-four hours before. They passed the second cut in the mesa wall three miles farther on and found no sign. All the upper basin was clearly visible except some higher, tree-cloaked ground near the northeast corner. Over in the northwest the high, curving walls bent around to the south two miles away. No cattle were in sight.

"They like the sweet matt grass up clost to them falls where the river comes in," Buster explained. "We oughta find 'em up there. That's above the long cut. Gee gosh, Ben, you reckon the rustlers done got them, too?"

Ben had no opinion, but lots of misgivings. He found the "long cut" Buster mentioned to be a two-mile, narrow gorge, fifty feet deep along most of its course where the river flowed swiftly and where cattle could not get down to water. Beyond a lift in the terrain, on which there was

some scattered tree growth, they came to a swath of verdant matt grass land a half mile wide abutting the cliffs. Buster pointed to a narrow defile in the high cliffs.

"That's where the river comes out," he explained. "It runs in shaller banks a little ways before it gets deep in the long cuts. The cows graze up here and get water at the shaller place."

There was considerable fresh cow track sign thereabouts. The two riders came within sound of the waterfalls before they were in position to see within the close upper gorge. For two hundred yards below where the stream came swiftly out of the mountain defile the banks were low and in most places covered with grass to the water's edge. There were numerous fresh cow tracks down to the water where the animals had gone to drink, or had crossed the stream. But there were no cattle, not even cows with young calves, in sight!

"Looks like them ghost rustlers been playing tag with your cows again, Buster!" Ben Boston told the dumbfounded, speechless boy. "There's no cattle in this upper country."

CHAPTER X

FOR MANY minutes Ben Boston rode Skillet slowly up and down each side of the river between the beginning of the lower gorge and the high cut where it came out below the roaring falls. Buster followed him. Finally, after they both stood their horses again in the middle of the river at the mouth of the upper gorge, looking at the spraying, lashing waterfall a hundred yards in front of them, Ben spoke.

"A lot of them cow tracks look like they was made by cows being drove down into the water, Buster," he said, nodding backward. "Maybe they was drove across and around somewhere else. I don't believe the tracks could've all been made by cows coming down to water peaceable. There's a few horse tracks, too. If them there falls wasn't seventy-eighty feet high, I'd sure think the cows was hazed right up the river. It's shaller enough along here."

He urged Skillet on within the gorge. The stream narrowed there somewhat, but was still wide enough in its spread to only wet Skillet's knees. The bottom was smooth rock. The walls on each side were solid rock up for a hundred feet or more, then tapered back in declivitous shoulders holding some scanty soil and scrub bush growth. Buster followed Ben cautiously. Their horses snorted at the purling waters about their legs, dipped their nozzles and drank fitfully, then champed at their bits, staring ahead.

Ben forced Skillet onward until he had to lift his stirrups above the increasing depth of the water. From that point he could see most of the inner circle the falling waters had cut out during the ages, but the walls were precipitous all around that deep, water-sprayed bowl. He could see the solid rock behind the split fingers of the waterfall. This he noticed when he remembered hearing ing about rustlers forcing cattle under a waterfall somewhere to be driven up a hidden trail back of the cataract cliff. Such was utterly impossible here. Reluctant to force Skillet into the deeper water of the pool before him for further futile search and conjecture, he turned back and led Buster on a ride around the north and west rim of the valley, following some horse tracks which led off in that direction. Here and there these horse tracks were superimposed on cow tracks.

During the next hour they found four places where a few cattle had been forced to do the incredible and climb steep mountain goat trails up toward the northern mesa at spots where there were soil-filled breaks in the solid rock walls. After examining these startling discoveries, Ben spoke.

"Harry Pike was wrong," he said. "They can drive cows up to the moon, 'specially when a lead rider goes ahead and plenty others haze hard enough from behind. That's what was done here."

Ben decided to follow the danger-

ous route to the world above. He and Buster clung to their saddles going up to prove if mounted men could really negotiate the steep climb without too great danger of a slip. Above the first hundred and fifty feet of badly torn footing, the trail widened. The small number of cattle and the horsemen driving them who had come up only a few hours before, had gone forward easier, following a sidling long trail to the top, six or seven hundred feet higher than the northern valley floor.

When they had spent an hour riding around the northwestern corner above the valley and a mile toward the south, finding no more sign, Ben turned their course in reverse. Buster was positive there could be no more spots in the west wall of the valley where anything moving on less than wings could come up.

IN THE middle of the afternoon they found five head of cattle grazing three miles back from the northern valley rim. These bore the oval brand of the Sugar Bowl on their left hips and they showed ample indications of a recent hard drive out of their peaceful grazing grounds far below. Within a half hour thirteen more such cattle were found in the fairly level, scantily forested mountain country. Ben told Buster his opinion that these were all of the animals that had been forced up the trails they had found.

"But there's gotta be more, Ben," Buster insisted. "There's gotta be more'n three hundred yet. Them rustlers shoved 'em up here and left 'em to pick up later. Let's round 'em all up and push 'em back down 'fore night."

Ben's brows were knit in thought. He seemed to hear Buster's talk as if in a daze. After letting their horses breathe a while, he answered the boy.

"Nope, Buster. We'd never get 'em back down that slide alive. We can't even risk taking our broncs back that way. There's funny business back of this thing. Over three hundred cattle gone and no sign of more'n about twenty's going, and Buster, my lad, there's heap much pucky-mucky in these here few being drove up and left here where a blind man could follow the sign. Maybe they'll be picked up later, maybe they won't, but we'll leave them here for a spell."

He wouldn't tell Buster that he meant to return and track the riders who had driven these cattle up here.

"What's pucky-mucky mean, Ben?"

"One kind of Indian talk for heap big trick. Can we get across the river over east and circle 'round to that upper cut down to the valley?"

"Sure we can. The river runs down a shaller canyon to just above the falls where it cuts down into the falls gorge. It comes outa them mountains way back up 'onder." He pointed toward high mountains lifted far above the vast plateaux of the west and south. "The river is the northwest line of our mesa grazing rights. We run cattle clear up to the foothills and over to Ute Canyon and clear down south to the butt of the mesa—that is, we used to, 'fore papa died. We're not s'posed to be up on this side, 'cause this is sheep country. No cowmen are allowed north and west of the river."

"WHO USES this country, then — who're the sheepmen?"

"That's ol' Jubal Hockaday. He'll have this country up here stinkin' with his woollies soon's the grass grows a little more. His sheep ranch is over in Shepherd Valley, north yonder. He threatened last year to run his stinkies 'crost the river if we wasn't gonna use the grass over there, but Sis told 'im that he'd sure have lotsa mutton to eat up if he done that."

"Well, we gotta h'ist our tails and hit for home, Buster, or Old Man Night will catch us up here. I could stand a hunk of steak and a platter of fried spuds right now."

Buster pointed the way and they made good time across to the river. Ben was surprised to find the course of the stream so shallow along the plateau top. In spite of a swift current and entire lack of rock bottom, the stream had not cut more than twenty feet below the surface of the

nearly flat mesa land. He had acquired a layman's interest in geology and a slight knowledge of the subject. Casually he spoke of his curiosity when he and Buster had crossed the stream and were heading southward toward the cut.

"The Utes say," Buster explained, "that a long, long time ago there were gods livin' up here that could change the river courses and make the water run out on their fields. Miss Rutley, my teacher, says that the old Indian ruins 'way back up the river toward the mountains is ruins of the Cliff Dweller people and that the funny, long ridges and sinks down the center of this mesa is where they used to run irrigation ditches. They lived up here, Miss Rutley says, 'cause they could fight off their enemies better than in the valleys."

"That's real interesting, Buster."

THEY reached the cattle trail leading down to the valley when the sun was setting behind the high ramparts in the west. It was fully dark when they rode into the barnyard at the Sugar Bowl headquarters. The house was all alight and there seemed to be many people there. Betty came out to meet the late home-comers, carrying a lighted lantern.

"What happened?" she asked, showing high tension. "Where have you two been all day?"

"Aw, we been ridin' and learnin' things, Sis," Buster told her disdainfully. "Why get all het up with worry? Ben and me can take care of ourselves, can't we, Ben?"

Betty had seized Buster's bridle reins before he dismounted. Ben saw that the boy's welfare was close to his sister's heart.

"I had a right to be worried," she replied with a tone of mild reproof, "when you didn't get back by dinner time. Then dark came on and you still hadn't shown up. Did you find the cattle all right?"

Ben had dismounted then and she looked at him for answer. He saw the beam of apprehension in her questioning eyes. Buster started to answer his sister, but Ben caught his shoulder and quieted him. Several men were coming out of the house toward the barn and the lantern light.

"We found some of them, Miss Betty," Ben said. "Some of 'em had strayed up on the mesa where we found a few. We'll find the others, I guess. Hello, fellers."

He greeted Jase Huggins and Watt Craigie who came within the light rays with Harry Pike, followed by four other men. Betty introduced Waldo Beckett, Tom Krutch, Nat Depwe and Rufe Gibbons, telling Ben that they were ranching neighbors of the Sugar Bowl and had been friends of her father's. They arrived at midday, she explained, coming to see Ben, and remained to join the searching party she was about to organize.

"I'm mighty sorry to've put you out so, gents," Ben told the ranchers as he shook hands, "but Buster and I ran into something right downright puzzling. We tried to figger out part of the puzzle before starting back. Are you gents all members of this local cowmen's association Miss Betty told me about?"

"We are, Mr. Boston," Waldo Beckett, a spare built, wiry man, oldest of the four ranchers, replied. "Fact is, we're the officers of the Association and we come out to see you about joining up with us. It might seem like to you we could've waited a spell till you got your bearings, but with things like they are 'round the Sugar Bowl and with some of the rest of us, we thought it best to see you right off, we being all together in Escolante when you won that auction sale."

"Yeah," Tom Krutch added, "your men told us at the hotel last night that you aimed to go buying stock soon. We thought you'd be able to use the Association's help and advice, you being new in this section."

"But not in buying stock," Beckett explained before Ben could speak, "not that we wouldn't be glad to help you find what breeding stock you want. What Tom means is that after you get the stock in here, we'll be wanting to get your co-operation. We aim to tie up with cattlemen in other sections and run down this slick rustler bunch that's been nibbling off all

our profits lately. Also, we gotta lay down the cowman's law to the sheepmen that's trying to get a holt on more grass that's always been cowmen's grass. We aim to keep it clean cow grass. What's that you found out today you was talking about?"

BEN DETAILED his and Buster's experiences, assisted here and there by Buster's irrepressible interjections. He left out conjectures he had half formed. Before he finished telling his story Mrs. Mester beat the dinner iron beside the kitchen door. Betty invited them all in to supper. Harry remained behind to care for the two tired horses.

When the four cattlemen rode away from the Sugar Bowl that night they carried Ben Boston's name on the roster of membership in the Escolante Cattlemen's Association and Ben knew where he could buy all the breeding stock of muleyheads that he wanted. He did not ask the ranchers directly about Barr Orkin as yet, but he knew that he would either have to accept him as a friend and fellow-member in the Association or find his future in the Sugar Bowl less pleasant than he had anticipated.

According to Jase Huggins' and Watt Craigie's latest reports from town, there had been an ominous silence from the direction of the Oh-Kay ranch people and from Marshal Gordon Sucher. Ben didn't believe that a man of Orkin's type and standing would let the smashing, knockdown blow to his left eye and to his vulnerable pride go unrevenged. He held no regrets, for he was still firm in his first opinion of Orkin, that the man was a cunning, two-faced sort who was safest when forced into open enmity.

At the breakfast table, before daylight Monday morning, Betty asked Ben if he would go to town with her for the conference over Buster's participation in the Sugar Bowl partnership. The other men had already gone out and Buster had not yet been awakened. Mrs. Mester was busy in the kitchen.

"All the use I could be in the talk," Ben told her, "would be to offer proof that the boy's investment would be safe. I can't be there, and you can tell the Judge and Mr. Lemming that the reason I'm not is because I'm following the tracks of the man who drove the decoy cows up the north-end wall. I'm heading up there this morning before the trail gets too cold. That's better than just talk promise that we'll make this outfit safe. I aim to find the ghost rustlers."

"Square John might say that you couldn't find them if he couldn't."

"If he does, just remind him that I'll be right here working on it full time, while he could only sashay out here after the ghosts walked and went. Tell him I've already found a little straw blowing in the wind."

Betty's face brightened and she asked quickly, "Have you really found something definite so soon, Mr. Boston?"

"Little spring branches run down to big rivers, Miss Betty," was all the answer he would give her. "I'll have Huggins go in town with you and Buster; Craigie will ride with me and Pike can watch out for things here."

He arose to go. As he put on his hat she spoke again.

"I'm beginning to feel a lot of confidence in you, Ben."

Ben didn't lose time going around to the mesa top in the north by way of the eastern cuts. He led Watt Craigie straight north to where he and Buster had climbed the heights on Sunday. They dismounted and led their struggling horses up to the easier going on the wider shelves.

Both men were experienced in all the sagacity of Indian trailing tricks. Displaced branches of trees and shrubs, overturned stones and pebbles, bent and bruised grass stems, scars of horseshoes on stone and other even less obvious signs could be read by them as easily as a bibliophile reads books. They found recent horse tracks that had not been made the day before by Ben and Buster. They followed these with little difficulty until they came together with many other uncloven hoof tracks.

"THEY left them few cows they drove up and then they bunched here," Watt Craigie said, reading sign as Ben was doing.

"And went on north across the sheep country," Ben added, looking away on the well-marked trail of the riders they tracked. "Long's they keep together we won't have trouble following. Let's go."

"But why the devil did they leave the cows here after so much trouble drivin' 'em up?" Craigie asked.

"A decoy for us," Ben said. "That's all that's clear in it now. Over three hundred head went in another direction."

Near noon they came down into Shepherd Valley. Long before they reached the suddenly sloping drop into the valley the horses were snorting occasionally. A slightly recognizable, unpleasant aroma came on the air. Once, when he first caught the smell, Craigie exploded with one word of disgust: "Sheep!" They soon saw the scattered flocks of woollies grazing on the valley grass and hurried on the tracks of the other riders to get beyond sheep country as quickly as they could, not wishing to have an encounter with the sheepmen. In the course of an hour they saw two men on horses lazily watching over the sheep flocks, but passed them by at a distance without even the courtesy of a hand-waved salutation. Craigie cursed his loathing toward the two herders.

The tracks they followed turned northwestward. In early afternoon those tracks led to a well-beaten road which came from the south, west of the hills, and went on straight northward. A horde of other horse tracks from the south muddled together with those they followed, blotting out all certainty about them. Ben studied the situation for many moments.

At last he said: "This road leads to Purvis, 'cording to my learnings. I'll slide on up there and 'tend to sending them telegrams and letters to the old bunch. You mozey back to the Sugar Bowl, Watt. Maybe I'll know a bit more time I get back in two-three days."

"What'll we be doin' at the Bowl?" Craigie asked, uncertain.

"Don't sleep too sound. Keep your eyes peeled." He told Craigie how to get across the river atop the plateau and down to the east cuts into the Sugar Bowl, also warned him not to cross trails with any of the sheepmen. Then with a wave of hand and a "S'long, pardner," he headed Skillet toward the north. Craigie dolefully turned on the back trail.

CHAPTER XI

IT WAS two hours before midnight when Watt Craigie rode a very tired pony into the Sugar Bowl barnyard. Jase Huggins, who had already established himself in the long bunkhouse, hearing Craigie's arrival, came into the barn while the younger cowboy unsaddled.

"Where's Ben?" he demanded.

Craigie explained the day's incidents and asked Jase about his day in town.

"Nothin' much doin' with me," Jase told him, " 'Cept the sheriff and the county judge, confabbin' with Miss Betty, ast me a passle o' questions 'bout Ben and what we was gonna do here. They wound up by makin' the little kid and Miss Betty partners with Ben here. They gonna put in twenty thousand of their money to buy breed cows. Ben must've already agreed to it, I guess."

"You see nothin' else, hear nothin'?" Craigie questioned. "The Oh-Kay bunch 'round town any?"

"Not a sign of 'em. I ast the sheriff. They ain't none of 'em been seen since Sat'day night. I seen Lucy Bollinger and her daddy. Lucy angled for a invite out here and Miss Betty ast them out whenever they wanta come. What you wanta know so much 'bout the Oh-Kay bunch, for? They'll not bother us and Ben no more, now that he's bought in here. Orkin's a member of that cattle association Ben joined."

"I sorta feel like Ben sees it different," Craigie replied.

"What way different?" They started out of the barn.

"I don't exactly know, Jase. You know how shut-mouth Ben is till he's plumb sure 'bout a thing. Today when we run into that road and the tracks went all mixed, Ben said something 'bout them other riders havin' come up from toward the Oh-Kay over west o' here and come a-purpose to smidgin out the ones we trailed. When I ast 'im what more he figgered out o' it, he jest looked down that road and said, 'Maybe it's 'cause I don't like that Orkin feller, Watt.' Then he told me to forget it, but he wasn't lookin' like he forgot much. What's that?"

Both men stopped in the barn doorway and looked to the right into the darkened tool room and repair shop. Something had clinked in there. Craigie struck a match to investigate. Harry Pike came out of the shop then.

"I come to get a hammer," Harry explained, exhibiting a claw-hammer. "Gotta fix a table leg that's rickety."

Craigie threw the match down and stepped on it, then the three men walked on to the house kitchen without further talk. Mrs. Mester set out cold food for Craigie and offered to make him hot coffee which he refused. Betty came in and heard the cowboy's story of the day and looked at him reproachfully when he finished.

"I suppose you had to do as he directed," she said, "and not go on with him, anyway. There are people who would like to see Ben Boston fade out like our cattle have been doing and they might decide that the earlier he does it, the better."

"I had a idee 'long that same line, Miss Betty," Watt defended himself, "but I know Ben, too. When he says to one of his rannihans, 'Do this and do that, cowboy,' w'y, ma'am, he means jest that, so I didn't argue with him none. I come back."

THAT NIGHT Ben Boston stopped at a ranch on Black Powder Creek. He learned that it was the 8-in-a-Diamond and that it was thirty-five miles yet to Purvis, but more than that he found out nothing about the ranch except what he observed. He slept in the bunkhouse, taking the role of a chuckliner. Only six punchers occupied bunks where there were accommodations for thirty men. Ben gathered that many of the ranch's riders were away on spring round-up and branding over in the east somewhere.

One thing he was certain of, but concerning which no one at the 8-in-a-Diamond spoke. The riders whose many tracks he had followed had turned off the main road and put up at the 8-in-a-Diamond the previous night. Furthermore, the cowpokes on the ranch wore guns and did a lot of poker playing till late before turning in. They invited Ben to join the game, but he pretended ignorance of poker and they, evidently believing he was a moneyless wanderer, didn't urge him. He left immediately after breakfast and arrived at sundown, hungry and tired, in the railroad town of Purvis.

After stabling Skillet and securing a room in the hotel, where he ate supper, he went down to the railroad yards. The depot was closed for the night. He wandered on to the stockyards and found that the hard-caked, smooth ground indicated that no cattle had been shipped from here for a long time.

He was back in the hotel, sitting in the lobby to hear the talk of some loungers there, when four men came in brushing dust from their clothes. One of them was short, square Bangy, Bill Marlin's jail companion. Ben had never seen the other three. Bangy's keen-eyed, swift glance about the lobby hesitated just one second when it darted in Ben's direction. The quartet registered and went up to their rooms. Ben was sure Bangy had told his three companions something about him while they stood at the registry counter, for they gave him quick surveys from under shadowing hat brims. He pretended not to see them.

Ben wondered why Bangy, an Orkin rider, was so far from home, and if he was one of the many whose tracks had pointed north from the Oh-Kay ranch. He went over to a writing table and sat down to write

his letters and telegrams. These must be dispatched as to their whereabouts. He knew where five could be found by telegraph; seven could only be reached by the slower letters.

A FEW minutes after ten o'clock he finished writing and took his dozen letters and telegrams to his room on the second floor. A reflector lamp at the far end of the hall cast an uncertain light as far as his room door near the front. A man stood against a door facing across from the light. This man seemed to be talking with some one inside the room, but Ben thought that perhaps his own movements were being watched.

He put his messages on top of his dresser, made sure that his window was securely fastened and unbuckled his gun belt. He was tired and meant to get a good sleep before the long journey homeward that must start on the morrow. Taking up one of the two chairs, he started toward the door to brace it under the knob as reinforcement for the old-fashioned lock. At that moment a gentle knock sounded upon the door.

Ben set the chair down and silently quickly buckled on his gun, then walked over to one side of the door as the knock was repeated.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"An old friend, Ben Boston," came the surprising answer in a low voice. "Open up your shell, old terrapin."

Ben turned the key and flung the door back. Bangy and two of his companions stood there. Bangy's formerly poker face bore a smile now that was not strong enough to break his thin lips.

After a moment of standing silent with that slim smile, Bangy greeted: "Hi-yuh, old jail pardner. I thought I saw you in the lobby. Got to thinkin' 'bout it and went back down to make sure it was you and the clerk said you'd come up. You're lookin' for good breed cows cheap, ain't you?"

"Might be interested in a straight proposition," Ben said, willing to follow any lead.

"Nothin' straighter'n this offer our rancher friend's got to make you. Come on down to his room yonder."

The men wore guns and Ben had no desire to stick his head into a trap they might have set for him, yet he saw at once that if they had violence in mind, they had come prepared to give it to him here if he did not go with them. Reluctantly he decided to play their game, but with an open eye and close guard.

"Where are the cows your man has for sale?" he asked Bangy.

"Out east, south o' the railroad, in easy drivin' distance to the Sugar Bowl."

"All right," Ben agreed, curious to see the thing through. "Lead the way." He thought at once that this might be an offer to sell cattle stolen from some other section of the country. In that case he could get a lead on who the rustlers were if he could play them along far enough.

The two other men, slenderer and taller than Bangy, never said a word as they started ahead. They entered the room at the end of the hall where one of them had stood against the door-facing when Ben came up to his room. A red-faced, medium-sized man, who still wore his cowboy hat and didn't look like the big cattleman Bangy had talked about, arose from the edge of a bed. Like the others, he also wore a gun. Ben stopped in the doorway as Bangy went on through.

"Meet Mr. Shore, Mr. Boston," Bangy waved a hand at the red-faced cowboy, then looked back, surprised. "Come on in, Boston."

He made as if to shut the door, waiting for Ben to enter. Shore stood where he was as if waiting for Ben to come to him.

"Come in, Boston, with your hands up and make it quick!" Bangy ordered in a much altered tone, brittle and hard. Ben saw the gun in his hand that he had not seen Bangy draw.

This was much more than he had anticipated, but he was not the easily rattled kind. It was plain to him on the instant that a move for his own gun, or the slightest disobedience to Bangy's command would

bring lead his way, lead that he could scarcely hope to evade. He stepped inside, remembering an old maxim of fighting men that one must never resist, or try tricks on an enemy when that enemy was most expectant of such. Wait and catch them on the first unguarded point and then act quickly.

"Get his gun, Tinker," Bangy ordered.

One of the two men between Ben and Shore, with a dull look of fear on his face, came forward. Ben turned himself as if to offer his gun side to Tinker, taking one side step to meet him. He had a purpose in that which none of the four tensed men understood until it was too late.

"Don't get between—" Bangy started to hiss a low command to Tinker, but didn't finish.

Ben's hands came down and shot Tinker like a catapult against Bangy, then leaped backward, snapping his glance to Shore and the other man who would be his first danger in that flashing second of Bangy's frustration. Shore was lifting his gun with stabbing haste; the other man leaped toward the door, past the tangled Bangy and Tinker. Ben had snatched his gun as he shoved Tinker. He dropped Shore with a center chest shot.

THE unnamed man had disappeared out of the doorway. Bangy knocked prostrate at first, shoved Tinker violently off of himself. Stooped, his left knee and hand bracing himself on the floor, he jerked his black gun upward and fired. Ben was moving swiftly sideways. Bangy's bullet crashed the glass window back of its dodging target. A half second later Ben's gun roared its second toll of death, aimed straight for the blob of dusty black hair on Bangy's stooped head. The latter plunked down on the floor. The gun in Bangy's hand struck the floor with a loose clatter. It remained there, an inch or two from the motionless hand that had held it.

Tinker had disappeared, crawling fast, out of the door. Ben heard running feet in the hallway. He jumped out and saw the dimly outlined, racing form of Tinker turn down the front steps to the lobby. In a swift, second-long survey, he saw Shore on his back beside the bed, a death glare in his eyes. Bangy sprawled on his face, motionless.

Ben blew out the lamp on the table, ran to the reflector lamp in the hall end and blew it out, then started toward his room. Twenty feet from his door he heard rapid steps of someone coming up from the lobby. He flattened himself against the wall, completely shrouded with darkness. By means of the faint light reflected from the lobby below, he could see the hotel clerk hesitate at the head of the stairs and look down the darkness of the hall. Suddenly the clerk whirled and ran down the steps. Ben stepped lightly on to his room, unlocked the door and slipped inside, relocking the door behind him, leaving the key in the lock.

He ejected the two empty shells from his gun, stepped to the window and threw the brass cylinders out as far he he could, closed the window and lighted his lamp. Working with quick, experienced hands, he cleaned his gun barrel, then smelled of the muzzle and seemed satisfied. No one, smelling that muzzle, would believe the gun had been fired recently.

Ben's purpose was not simply to evade the law if he should be named as the killer of two men. He wanted to make sure first if those two men who had escaped were honest enough with the law to come back and accuse him. If they did not, he would know for a certainty that he was in for a war with an outlaw gang. Of that he was sure already, but he wanted to make doubly sure.

In addition to that, he didn't want to lose the time remaining in Purvis answering questions. Those runaways would be ahead of him and make even his return to the Sugar Bowl dangerous if they carried their message to the leaders who had decreed his death. And who were those leaders? Ben acknowledged that the mere presence of an Orkin rider with the gang did not necessarily involve Orkin. Bangy could

have been working with a band having connections with the 8-in-a-Diamond and had followed him from there to Purvis. A likely explanation of this quick move to remove him was that his identity had been established after he passed the 8-in-a-Diamond and his present journey considered a dangerous one of investigation into rustler territory. It seemed another link in the slim chain of evidence which pointed northward to rustler territory instead of southward from Escolante.

A minute before the sound of several pairs of feet came on the stairs and hallway floor outside, Ben was in bed, his gun within reach on a chair. He heard the clerk rapidly telling something as the three or four pairs of feet walked past his door. When they had passed on, he arose and unlocked the door, listening through a crack. The investigators carried a lamp. They reached the back room and one or two of them made some startled cries over what they discovered. The hotel clerk shouted loudly enough to be heard.

"Them two fellers sure done it, marshal. They killed 'em and run out like wild fire was behind 'em!"

There was murmuring from a voice too low for Ben to hear, then the excited clerk's voice came again.

"I never seen 'em before tonight, marshal, but I'd know 'em if you catch 'em. Maybe you could grab 'em 'fore they get outa town—at the stable, if you hurry."

A FEW further words, a little louder from the marshal, ordering some one to stay and watch the dead, then hurrying feet came toward the front. Ben closed his door and gently locked it, braced the chair under it and went back to bed. For two hours he remained keenly awake, hearing steps come and go with astening thumps outside, but no one stopped before his door. At last he forced himself to sleep, knowing that he must be rested well for the task of getting back to the Sugar Bowl.

No one asked him anything the next morning when he went down for breakfast, not even if he had heard the disturbance during the night. Another man was in charge of the counter to take the key and check Ben out.

At the depot he dispatched his telegrams and asked the agent if Purvis was the only stock loading point for the south country around Escolante.

"No, sir," the agent told him. "Lotsa cows are loaded over at Thumb Creek station forty miles east of here. Fact is, they been loading more than we have the last two-three years, but this is the best point for the Escolante country and most of the ranchers down that way use our chutes. Hope you'll give us your business, Mr. Boston. You getting these men in to ride for you?" He looked over the telegrams.

"Yes, and more, too. Gotta mail some letters to the others?"

After a little more talk he left the depot, mailed his letters and rode out of town on Skillet at nine o'clock. That night he camped in the hills five miles west of the 8-in-a-Diamond ranch, discreetly avoiding an encounter with any riders along the well-traveled north-south trail. Two hours before sundown the next day, Thursday, he rode within a mile of what he judged to be Jubal Hockaday's sheep ranch headquarters in an east-west valley nearly as expansive and not so mesa-walled as the Sugar Bowl. It was on the northwest side of the mountains which jutted out from the east and sloped down to the mesa lands, giving rise to the clear-water stream that fed Sugar Bowl Valley.

Ben reached the high country of the foothills just before sundown, searching for the river which would guide him homeward. From a grassy, treeless shoulder of the mountains he spied the silvery course of the stream in the southeast and turned Skillet toward it.

Before he reached the river he came to a peculiar depression that seemed to be a very ancient stream bed, now partly filled in by the wind-blown dust of ages. A scattering of trees actually grew in the center of

the old river course. Ben figured that it had once been a river because of the still partly uncovered sandstone walls here and there which carried the horizontal marks of water erosion. He remembered Buster's references to the old Indian legends of how the ancient people of this region had, like gods, changed the ways of the rivers.

SUDDENLY, while studying the rocks and marveling at the growth of trees in the very bed of the old river's path, Ben became aware of the grassless, beaten soil. He had been vaguely conscious of the same before, but had not particularly noticed the tracks of the animals that had torn the dirt, thinking that this was a place of refuge in storm for the sheep of Jubal Hockaday. Now he looked more intently at the ground, for his roving eyes had spied the larger tracks of cows in the soil. He rode up the hollow toward the higher country, walking Skillet and studying the innumerable tracks of cattle. They all pointed in the direction he was going.

A half mile farther along, the ancient stream bed gradually shallowed out and the trail of cloven hoof tracks widened, turned off to the north across flat country below the foothills. There were fresh cow tracks, very recently made, and horse tracks of the drivers, but Ben was convinced that the number of cattle which had passed here not long ago could not have alone given the well-worn character to the trail. Hockaday, or some one else, had used this trail for cattle for a very long time. It was many miles from the upper rim of Sugar Bowl Valley, nevertheless Ben could not help wondering why Hockaday, or any one else should have so many cattle on this sheep country side of the river. If he had not already convinced himself that Sugar Bowl cattle could not have been driven out the north end of the valley, he would have been more suspicious.

The sun was getting near the fire-blazed horizon in the far western country. Ben wanted to reach more familiar territory before darkness. With a determination to return here later and unravel the mystery which this strange cattle trail raised up, he turned his horse up the east slope from the old river bed and went toward where he had seen the present river course. He then saw a group of Cliff Dweller ruins clustered on bluffs off to his left, high above him. The ancient habitations had been built in a strategically impregnable place under overhanging shelves of massive, solid stone and were accessible from below only by steep, easily defended climbs over rock terraces.

It was easy now to decipher the mystery of the changed river course. Those people of long ago had simply dammed up the old river just below where it came down from the mountains and turned it out across the more level land of the vast south mesa. From here they had found it easy to run laterals over their cultivable lands for irrigation, or let the river take its new course down to the Sugar Bowl.

Before he crossed the river he saw two men ride out of the scrub pines which clothed the higher ground to the right of the downward river course. They were watching him as they approached at a gallop. Ben did not wait for them there, but put Skillet into the shallow stream and reached the eastern shore before he halted.

The riders stopped with the red rays of the setting sun back of them and one shouted across at Ben: "I guess you knew it was sheep country on this side, feller. What was you doin' trailin' 'round over here?"

"Coming back from Purvis, if it's any of your business," Ben replied. He couldn't see the faces of the two very clearly, but could distinguish their bearded, unkempt general appearance.

"It's our business, all right," came the unpleasant answer. "Cowmen use the west road in the flatlands from Purvis to Escolante. If you don't know the agreement, you better get hep mighty quick. No cowman crosses from your side to this side o' the river."

"I'll find out about that, too. S'long, sweetheart." He turned Skillet over the rise of ground and headed homeward.

CHAPTER XII

IT WAS nearly midnight before Ben Boston arrived at the Sugar Bowl headquarters. Everybody awakened and came to greet him, including Buster, who ran out barefooted and in his night clothes. It had not occurred to him before then that he could be of such great importance in the lives of other people. Even Harry Pike seemed unusually interested in his recounting of what he had done and seen. He left out all reference to the fight and killing in Purvis, but told of the mysterious cow trail in the old river bed.

When he asked and was told that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred at the ranch, he did not press Betty Lee for what she might have to say. When they were alone in the big living room and all the others had again retired for the night, Betty broached the subject over which he was most concerned with her.

He sat in an easy chair, enjoying the comfort of relaxation, while she sat down, cross-legged in Oriental manner, on the rug, with a gracefulness and informality that surprised and pleased him. He was not too tired to notice the suppleness of her shapely body under the thin, black dress, for she sat close to his outstretched feet, looking up at him with her luminous, brooding dark eyes.

"Have you changed your mind about our partnership, Ben?" she asked.

"Not a bit," he assured her. "Did Buster's guardians agree?"

She did not cease looking up into his eyes as she answered: "Yes. We have agreed to put in twenty thousand. It's in the bank on a joint checking account. You may use it to buy stock, pay wages, or for any purpose in building up the ranch." He saw an unspoken question in her continued gaze.

"Well," he said, "what's the rest of it? Are we going in fifty-fifty on this?"

She moved her head slowly in negation and said: "No, Ben. The judge and sheriff agreed with me that since you saved us from losing everything, it was fair enough to ask for but a third share on our twenty thousand. They won't budge from that and they're waiting for you to come in and sign the papers on that basis."

He tried to look steadily into her clinging, fascinating eyes, but gave up in defeat and sat back, annoyance in his expression.

"I told you I wouldn't rest easy taking more than my rightful share here," he said with some resentment.

He saw, for the first time, a smile on her straight lips and a twinkle of mirth in her persistent eyes.

"I rather prided myself on the very comfortable beds we have in this old house, Ben," she declared with a wisp of petulance in her voice. "I do wish you'd let them comfort that restless soul of yours."

He arose suddenly and walked toward the open front door of the big room, turning his back to her before he spoke.

"How the deuce can a man quarrel with a woman like you, Betty Lee?" he demanded fiercely, then whirled on her. "You haven't a right to do this. Buster will grow up in a few years and hate me for taking more than I ought've taken for my share."

"If you don't hate us first for letting you in for all the trouble and grief you'll have here," she countered quietly.

HE SAT down again with quick movement, his expression one of animation, forgetting his recent annoyance.

"Listen, girl," he said, leaning toward her, "you think I'm the bellering welcher kind if it comes to fighting rustler varmints around here for what's mine? The fighting has already begun. Four gunslingers tried to load me with lead in Purvis Tuesday night. Luck was with me and I knocked two of 'em over there

in a hotel room and the other two skinned out fast. I didn't say anything about it up there, or to anybody else till now, because I wanted to find out if them men worked with some outlaw gang that wants my scalp, or whatever. It's the first real close fight I ever had and it's not scaring me outa the Sugar Bowl. I thought at first I wouldn't bother you with this, but I guess you'd oughta know. Do I look like I'm ready to back out on this deal now?"

He was surprised and disappointed that she showed no excitement over his story. She merely continued studying his face.

"You just knocked them over?" she questioned. "That's your way of saying you killed them."

Abashed a little by the seeming accusation in her words, he replied impatiently: "They used guns—shot at me first. What would you have had me do? Slap their ugly faces?"

She actually laughed then, lightly. "No, Ben. I think I know you a lot better than I've ever known any other man on such short acquaintance. Please don't think I'm hard and calloused because I don't get flouncy like some girls do over fighting and killing. It's just my raising. My father thought for many years that he'd never have a son to carry on—that I'd be his only heir. He began training me early to hide womanish feelings and kept it up, even after Buster came. I don't know whether to be glad of that, or not. Sometimes I wish—"

She shut off the words, leaning on one hand and looked at the rug on her left, the half-spoken wistfulness of her wish carried on in her gesture. He sat and watched her, not knowing what to say, thinking only that he was sorry for her, pitying her again. Her profile now as she saw with the side of her face toward him was very pleasing, he thought. The power of fascination in her most attractive feature, her eyes, was not lost with her face half turned away. The long, curving dark lashes and the brooding expression were still apparent. He stirred uneasily. She arose with quick, easy movement.

"You're very tired and I keep you with worthless talk," she said. A new anxiety was in her hasty glance. "The water tank is full and Mrs Mester left the stove cistern full of hot water. If you want to bathe before going to bed, the bath room and a free run of the house is yours. I'll run along to bed now."

"Thanks," he said. "You might be a hard-trained woman, Betty, but you're mighty sweet and very, very sensible—with all your hardheadedness over the partnership here. I'm still thinking about how fine it'd a been to have a little sister like you."

Her face went through quick changes as he spoke. She turned toward the foot of the stairs when he finshed, said "Good night" quietly, then hesitated a moment on the third stair step.

"Miss Lucy Bollinger and her father are coming out for a visit Saturday afternoon," she told him. "They'll stay over till Sunday. I thought you'd be glad to have them—from what Huggins told me."

He had already said good night to her and started toward the kitchen. He broke his going long enough to say: "That's all right with me," and went on his way. She climbed to the top of the stairs slowly and entered her room with little sound.

ON FRIDAY morning Ben rode to Escolante with Watt Craigie and Buster as the latter went in to school. He was surprised when told that two telegrams were waiting for him at the postoffice. They had been mailed out on the Thursday stage by the Purvis agent. One was from Pat Dooley, his oldest and best cowboy excepting Jase Huggins, and was dated at Miles City, Montana. It said: "Coming like hell afire by train. Shipping hosses and saddles to Purvis. Hurray. This pale-faced telegraph operator won't let me write what we wanta say. We're sober but won't be long. Gander coming with me. (Signed) Pat Dooley."

"Gander" Plunkett was one of those to whom Ben had sent a letter, addressed to an out-of-the-way station in Wyoming. He had obviously

left his former riding job and joined his old partner, Dooley, farther north.

The second telegram was from the other side of the compass, dated at Tombstone, Arizona, and said: "Faro ain't what fool cowboys think it is. Telegraph two months' wages and watch storm coming your way. Can ride through in a week. (Signed) Horseshoe Manning."

A half hour later Ben had mailed to the agent at Purvis a certified check for one hundred dollars with instructions to wire the balance, after costs, to Horseshoe Manning.

When the letter with the check was mailed, Craigie said: "Gosh, Ben, there ain't a lot o' men in this world that could make a scattered bunch come a-hellin' like that from all which-aways to you. You're 'bout as young as I am, but you sure got somethin' I wisht I had."

"Maybe the others won't tear loose to come," Ben said, going out to the street, "but I sure hope they do. We'll be needing them bad, old pardner."

They rode out to Beckett's ranch, nine miles southeast of Escolante, and spent th last half of the afternoon looking at young heifer stock which Beckett had offered to sell. They were good, full-bodied muleyheads that would mother heavy beef weighers. Beckett was willing to sell five hundred head that he would otherwise ship to fall market. Ben agreed to take them as soon as his force of riders was built up. They returned to the Sugar Bowl late at night, prepared to rest their regular riding mounts over the weekend and entertain the Bollingers.

CHAPTER XIII

JUST after the final, full cloak of night had settled upon the Sugar Bowl, Ben and Lucy, who had arrived that morning, returned to the house.

After supper everyone, including the three wage hands, Huggins, Craigie and Pike, gathered in the big living room at Betty's invitation. There was a fine old grand piano in one corner of the spacious room. Lucy asked Betty to play, but Betty deferred to her guest, for she had heard that Lucy played well.

For an hour Lucy played popular songs of the day, including tunes of range songs in which even the old ex-cowboy, Horace Bollinger, joined lustily in singing.

Then, above the singing within, came a shout from in front of the big house. Instant silence fell upon the gathering. Harry Pike hurried to the front door and answered the call.

"Can two wanderers of the night get down and come in?" the voice from outside inquired.

Lucy bounded up from the piano stool and cried: "It's Emmet Vargas! What brings him out this time of night?"

She hurried toward the door and Betty Lee said: "Ask them to come in, Harry."

Horace Bollinger, who had been seated, got up and followed Pike to the veranda as two men's steps sounded on the gravel path in front.

"Anything the matter, Vargas?" Bollinger asked out there.

"Not a thing, Mr. Bollinger," a gay young man's voice replied. "Hadn't been straddle of a horse just for the fun of it in a long spell, so I started out on a ride after supper. Mr. Orkin here fell in with me in front of the hotel. We got to talking about you folks being out here and decided to stretch our horses a little farther and say hello. Sounded like we broke into a happy song fest."

Then out there in the half light of the veranda followed introduction of Orkin to Bollinger and Lucy. Betty had gone outside. Buster stood just inside the door, peering out. Mrs. Mester and Jenny, the Blynn cook, who had come to sit near the door from the dining room a short time before, arose and went back to their kitchen. Ben, Craigie and Huggins stood expectant, trying to hide the astonishment on their faces.

"What the devil!" Craigie exploded in a hoarse whisper, looking at Ben. The latter shook his head and waited, leaning against the piano.

Jase Huggins said nothing, but his Adam's apple was busy as it generally was when something unusual stirred him.

Ben snapped suddenly away from the piano and whispered to his two cowboys: "Ginger outa here, fellers! Fork your broncs and see where them hundred and some odd cows that's left are bedded for the night. They oughta be 'bout a mile up river from what I saw of them from the mesa top at sundown. Hang around 'em till after midnight."

The two men never murmured, but hurried out through the back end of the house. The others were coming in from the veranda. A handsome, soldierly figure of a young man, with light brown hair and laughing eyes in a sun-tanned, clean-shaven face came in with Lucy Bollinger. Lucy was leading him across to Ben, her face aglow.

"This is Emmet Vargas, father's mine manager, Ben Boston," she said. "You two men ought to be good friends, even if your work is a good deal different out here."

The two men shook hands and Vargas said: "I'm very glad to meet you, Ben Boston. I heard that you came out from Colorado, too."

"Thanks, Vargas," Ben said. "I'm right glad to know you. Heard about you some, already." He was abstracted in his manner, his eyes looking on past Vargas and Lucy, a tight expression on his face.

ORKIN, walking beside Betty and talking to her, was coming across the long length of the room. Harry Pike and Bollinger had just come through the door. Betty Lee's sun-browned complexion seemed ashen as her dark eyes sought Ben's face with an appealing look. Barr Orkin was dressed in a dapper, brand new riding suit and wore shiny new, black boots. Any discoloration that may have lingered around his bruised left eye after the previous Saturday had been completely removed.

Betty's calm voice spoke: "Ben, Barr Orkin has come as our friend and neighbor to wish us good luck here. You two ought to understand each other now and be good friends."

Orkin extended his hand to Ben and said: "Please forget the past, Ben Boston. I made a mistake and am man enough to admit it. I had no idea who you were, or I'd acted different with you from the start. Now I want to be your friend and prove it."

Ben took the extended hand and thought to himself: "The devil is either a bigger fool than I think or he's not minding to take advantage of me in my own home." Aloud he said: "I like to meet a man half way, Orkin. You're welcome."

There was an audible lessening of tension in the room. Lucy laughed happily as she sat down at the piano and said: "Let's play and sing some more. Emmet is a wonderful singer, Ben. Do you sing, Mr. Orkin?"

"Not so well, Miss Bollinger. Never had time for that nice sort of relaxation, but I hope the rest of you will go on singing. You sounded mighty good as we come up the road."

Lucy looked around over the room, perplexity driving away her gaiety.

"Where's your redheaded tenor, Watt Craigie, gone to, Ben?" she asked.

"He and Jase've turned in," Ben told her quietly. "Begged to be excused."

"Oh, this is Saturday night," Lucy cried petulantly, swinging her pretty left foot impatiently. "Go call them back. We need that tenor voice. I want Emmet to hear how a real cowboy can sing."

Harry Pike, standing against the kitchen door, said: "I'll go bring 'em back," and disappeared before Ben could signal to him.

Buster Lee sat scrooged in a big chair, uncomfortable before the strangers after the way some had laughed at his singing efforts. Lucy began playing again; Ben and Vargas joined her in song. Orkin sat down and began to talk in low voice with Horace Bollinger. Betty contented herself with sitting relaxed and watching her guests, glad that a potentially embarrassing situation had been so easily passed.

After ten minutes Harry Pike stuck his head through the back door and called out as the trio at the piano finished a song: "Hey, Ben, them two punchers ain't nowhere outside. Their cayuses and saddles are gone, too. I'm gonna see what's happened to 'em."

He went away through the dining room and was out the yard door before Ben could walk across to where he had been.

"The rascals have prob'ly gone to town," Ben said to those in the room. "I'll have a look. Excuse me."

He went out toward the barn. Horse hoofs beat the earth off to the north, growing fainter as Ben reached the barn. He called to Harry Pike and received no answer. Skillet neighed to him from the corral. Ben was listening to the disappearing sound of the running horse and wondering how Pike could have saddled up and gotten away so quickly.

"He must've saddled his bronc before he came back in the house," he conjectured and then wondered why the former Sugar Bowl foreman should be riding up the valley so hurriedly. A new thought made him speed his actions.

Harry Pike might have reached the same conclusions that he had come to in the house when he sent Jase and Watt away. If the fellow came upon the two cowboys hovering quietly about the herd in the dark he might, if he was suspicious enough, start shooting without asking questions.

WITHIN three minutes Ben had Skillet saddled. He hated to let the people in the house think there was anything out of the ordinary going on, but he wouldn't risk riding out on this errand without his gun. He had had sufficient reason, slim as it was, for sending his men on night guard duty and that reason was enough for a cautious man to go armed. He dropped Skillet's reins over a hitching post in front of the house and went in for his gun. He had to go and come through the front room.

"I'm going for a ja'nt around," he replied to Betty's and Lucy's joined questions. "I'll be back soon. Make yourselves at home, folks."

He was gone. He mounted Skillet and swung away into a quick start.

The herd had been on the east side of the river, a half to three-quarters of a mile above the crossing when Ben had last seen them that evening. As Skillet splashed across the ford and came out upon the east bank, Ben saw a flashing pin point of light far up the river, like a nightfly. Then in the same neighborhood there were several other flashes until he lost count. It was dark, only starlight dimly graying the black night of the valley. The distance between him and those flashing points of light was too great for sound of gunfire to reach him above the noise of his going.

The ground was smooth and the plentiful grass cushioned the rapidly flying hoofs of Skillet. Ben drove straight for where he had seen the last of the gun flashes. After a minute he began to pass frightened cattle which ran out of his way. Cows bawled for their calves and the latter bleated here and there about the prairie. Ben turned over toward the tree line along the river, straining his eyes to pick out forms of ridden horses. He continued up-river in the edge of the tree shadows for another half mile. No more cattle were seen or heard. They had been scattered out from the river farther down. Ben brought Skillet to a walk, then stopped to give him his breath, listening for sounds, watching the shortened, star-lit landscape.

A blob of something moving showed up a hundred yards off diagonally from the river, toward the northeast. As the moving shadow came nearer Ben saw that it was two horses walking side by side, ridden by the indistinct figures of men. Then he heard the voices of those riders. The voices were little more than a murmur, but with a tremendous thrill of relief Ben recognized them and in the same instant he realized that he was in danger if he didn't quickly make himself known

before his men saw him standing there.

"Jase—Watt!" he called cautiously. "What happened? You two all right?" A cold fear struck him when he noticed how the two riders clung close together as if one or both were hurt.

"Hi, Ben," Craigie replied. "You oughta come a little sooner. We had a brush with some skunks we found rovin' 'round the herd. Jase caught a hunk o' lead crost his side."

The three men met. Ben put out his hand to Jase, who leaned on his saddle horn. Jase said: "It ain't nothin' bad, Ben. Jest scraped crost my slats on the right side under the skin and come out back. Burns a little now, but 'tain't bleedin' hardly any. I've had worse 'uns."

"What'd you find? What started the ruckus?" Ben asked.

"We come up to the herd and saw some guys sorta shovin' 'em along north," Craigie explained, a tinkle of excitement in his voice. "Me and Jase was 'bout twenty-thirty steps apart and had no time to confab over it. I knew them guys was the ghost rustlers—w'ant no guessin' 'bout it. I opened up on 'em with old Grizzly Killer here and Jase followed suit. They was sorta scattered at first. We jest seen two. Then they begun throwin' lead our way and runnin' off north this-away. Then we seen two more. Another'n come a-hellin' up from the trees and got in with the others and you oughta seen them guys tailin' it for the high ground. They headed up toward the lower cut yonder. We kept on till our guns was empty and Jase hollered to me he was hit. That was close to the wall and we heard 'em going up the cut. Then we come back and found you."

"HADN'T we better have a peep at your hurt, Jase?" Ben suggested.

"No need to here, Ben," Jase demurred. "Wait'll we git to the bunkhouse. I've felt it with my hand, front and back. 'Tain't bad a-tall."

They started back down the valley together and did not resume conversation until the somewhat less excited cattle had been passed. Then Craigie spoke.

"Reckon I oughta hang 'round out here, Ben?" he asked.

"Guess not. They know we're on the lookout. Besides, they'd know they couldn't get even this small herd up to the mesa and out of the country now before we'd be on their tails."

"You figger they'd a taken 'em up to the mesa and out that way, Ben?" Craigie asked. "That's not the way the others went."

"No, the others must've been eased out the south end in a scattered drive and them few put up the north wall to fool us. I don't see no sense to this raid tonight. They either figgered it was a easy walk-off that'd make even a hundred cows pay for the trouble, or it's somebody trying at this late day to dishearten us here. Did you fellers see, or hear anybody else behind you in the running fight—before I run into you?"

"Naw, Ben. Why?" Craigie demanded.

"Harry Pike come out ahead of me. Wonder where he is? Let's slip up to the house right easy so nobody'll hear us till we get Jase's hurt doctored and 'tended to. Don't say anything about the fight to anybody."

They entered the horse corrals at a rear gate, near the river and came up back of the barn. A few minutes later the three quietly slipped across from the barn to the bunkhouse where the home remedies of disinfectant liniment and salves were used for Jase's two clean-cut wounds and a body bandage applied. The bullet had cut through the skin above the fourth rib, coming out back of and below the arm. The neighborhood of the wound was darkly swollen and would be painful for several days, curtailing Jase's activities, but could have no serious results. Ben went out of the bunkhouse and started around the yard fence toward the front of the house. He meant to see if the two visitors' horses were still there, for he had half a mind not to go in before Orkin and Vargas left.

He turned the southwest corner of the yard where poplar trees waved and rustled their erect tops in the night breeze, shadowing the ground with a pall of blackness. He was passing along over grass that smothered his footsteps when he heard Barr Orkin saying good night to Betty Lee and the others at the door.

Ben stopped and leaned against a tree twenty feet from the hitchrack where the two horses remained tethered. Someone rode in from the north then. Orkin came out to his horse alone. Ben wondered why Vargas was not with him. The man on the arriving horse rode close to the hitchrack. Lucy began playing and Vargas sang. Betty had gone away from the door.

"That you, Mr. Orkin?" Harry Pike's voice asked in a low tone.

"Yeah, it's me, Pike. You find them fellers?"

"Didn't exactly see 'em. Maybe I better ride down the valley with you a ways if you're goin' that way. Might find 'em that way?"

"You talk funny," Orkin said with a strained voice as he heaved himself into the saddle. "All right. Let's go."

They rode off together. Ben found himself wishing that he was a horsefly just for a few minutes, then he gritted his teeth and murmured to himself.

"I don't guess I'd have to be a fly, hanging on their horses' rumps, to figure out what they're talking about," he said in bitter disillusionment as he went on to the gate. There was something in the nature of reason which made him sick, for in his estimation it was far worse than Barr Orkin's bland hypocrisy.

VARGAS had accepted Betty's invitation to remain overnight and ride back as the Bollingers went home on Sunday evening. After a casual statement that he had found Huggins and Craigie riding back from an inspection of the small cattle herd, Ben managed to signal Betty with his eyes and went out to the kitchen. Horace Bollinger excused himself and said he would retire. Buster had evidently gone to bed. The two cooks were not around. Lucy was left alone with Emmet Vargas in the living room.

When Betty came to him in the kitchen with her dark, questioning eyes silently studying his frowning face, Ben looked up at her and asked: "Betty, won't you tell me some more about Harry Pike? Sorta give me his back record, far as you know it."

"He's been in this country since the Gentiles first began to come in, while the Mormons still ran most everything. He was just a boy when he first worked for Mr. Johnson and my father."

"And he's been with the Sugar Bowl ever since?"

"No. He had a fight with Jack Daigley, our foreman at the time. He was about twenty then. I don't know what the fight was about, for I was just a child, but Daigley fired Harry and he went to work for Mr. Beckett. Later he worked for Barr Orkin two or three years and Orkin let him go. He worked a few months up in Wyoming and came back here to ask father for a job again after Daigley died. That was five years ago. I think father had always felt a bit sorry for Harry because of the way Jack Daigley had beaten him up and then fired him. He hired him and four years ago made him foreman."

"That was about the time the rustlers started ghosting your cows outa the valley, wasn't it?" Ben asked.

"Ben, you're not possibly hinting that Harry—"

"Please tell me things first, Betty. I've got to know the whole picture before I can see it straight."

"A few of our cattle had been rustled before father made Harry foreman. I think it was because Harry was so sure he knew where the cattle were being driven to down in Arizona that father put him in charge. Father's health was getting very bad."

"Betty, I've got only a few gleanings here and there. No cattle have been run south—not big herds. The desert country down that way between here and grass is too bad for hazing cows through. I heard some-

thing in Purvis to make me think rustled beef outa this Escolante country goes northeast. I'll learn more about that later. Have you paid Harry Pike his back wages yet."

"I gave him his check, but he hasn't been in to get the countersignatures of the judge and sheriff on it yet."

Ben's face was darkened with unspoken rage. He refused to give Betty further explanation and led her into the front room. Vargas was leaning against the piano, holding Lucy Bollinger's hands and seemed in earnest conversation with her. He released her hands quickly as Ben entered the room. Both he and Lucy seemed flustered. Ben sat down without noticing them and stared at the floor. Betty walked to the front door and stood there looking out.

Lucy's face changed abruptly as she looked from Ben to Betty Lee and she said: "What's the matter, Ben?"

Ben looked up impatiently as if he had just then noticed Lucy and Vargas. What he would have said was interrupted by Betty Lee, who spoke, still looking out into the starlit night: "I think that's Harry coming in now, Ben, going past the corner of the yard."

Ben said with ice in his tone: "Call him in here now, Betty. Make 'im get down there in front and come in right now."

Betty stepped through the door to the veranda and called to the rider. It was Pike and he stopped obediently to hitch his horse in front. He came in through the front door and looked at Betty Lee and Ben Boston with silent curiosity. Betty stood to one side; Ben remained seated, his hat on the floor beside his chair, his head bent forward. From that position he studied the face of the man before him. Pike became uneasy and looked over at the curious faces of Lucy and Vargas.

"What's happened here?" he finally asked unevenly. Ben's keen eyes saw the restlessness of guilt spread over the ex-foreman's face plain enough to give him his last needed corroboration. He stood up and faced Pike with a less menacing expression.

"WHERE did you ride to when you left a while ago, Harry?" he asked softly.

"I circled around, lookin' for them fellers."

"Which way did you go?"

"I—uh—I swung around south, down the road. Thought I'd catch up with 'em goin' to town, maybe go 'long with 'em if they wouldn't come back."

"And you didn't see nobody else?"

Ben's eyes were boring ice points again. Pike's face whitened.

"Yes—I met Mr. Orkin as he was goin' home."

"Did you talk with him much?"

"Naw, of course not. What would he— What's happened? Why're you askin' me all them questions?" Pike's face changed colors as he tried to force a show of anger to cover his fright.

"That check Miss Betty gave you has got to have my signature now before you can cash it," Ben went on coolly. "Let me have it."

With a blank face and open mouth, Pike ran a hand into the left breast pocket of his shirt under the buttoned flap and brought out a piece of paper, putting it into Ben's extended hand with fingers that trembled. Ben looked once at the paper, then slowly tore it into small bits and dropped them on the floor.

"Your boss will be waiting for your next report at the Oh-Kay ranch soon's you can get there, Pike," he said with deceptive mildness. The hard menace of his tone and cold, keen look increased as he went on: "Get your things together quick, pack 'em on your two personal horses and get off the Sugar Bowl fast. I guess you know why I tore up that check. You'll not get another, but before I get through with you, you'll pay plenty for what you've taken out of the Sugar Bowl in the past. To stop you from whining any fool pretense of innocence, I'll tell you this much: I heard you talking with Orkin out front when you come back from up-river, and I saw you ride off

with him to make a full report of the fight up the valley.

"You dirty liar and sneak thief, get out quick before I fill your stinking hide with the sorta pay you deserve!"

Pike whirled and ran precipitately out to his horse while the three other people in the room gasped in speechless amazement.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning Ben slipped out of his room before daylight, trying not to awaken their guests. He went to the bunkhouse to arouse Craigie. They left Jase to sleep as long as he could, for Craigie said he had groaned a great deal in his fitful sleep during the night. The two had a quick breakfast with Betty and rode away at break of day, leaving Betty to make their apologies to Vargas and the Bollingers in case they didn't return during the day.

They trailed the five rustlers through the first break in the east mesa wall. It was half way up the hard climb that they found the first traces of blood where a wounded man or horse had splashed some crimson, now dried and dark, on rocks in the trail. Two miles farther over upon the mesa they found where the five fleeing men had stopped for some time beside a small trickle of a brook stream. Crushed, flattened grass, to the size of a man's body, and blood stains told a clear story.

"We sure put lead in one of 'em, anyway," Craigie enthused. "Old Jase didn't git hit all for nothin'."

Ben was down on his knees and hands, studying the ground and grass blades closely. Finally he arose and said: "That feller kicked the bucket here. Rope dustings on the grass tell me that they shook out a rope and tied the body 'crost the saddle."

This deduction was confirmed as they followed the tracks on toward the northeast. One horse was plainly led behind one of the others. Ben had at first expected the trail to turn in north by the Cliff Dweller ruins and cross sheep country, but it didn't. It skirted the timbered range of east-west mountains on the south, going toward Ute Canyon.

At midday the two trailers came down into Ute Canyon Pass and saw where the rustlers had made camp for a few hours. The ashes of their camp fire were still hot with embers. Ben hesitated, buried in thought as he looked up into the mountain pass which led to the north.

"We gonna follow 'em through, ain't we, Ben?" Craigie asked anxiously.

"Not now," Ben replied with a slow shake of his head. "We know their layout is somewhere in that direction, not in the south desert country. Let 'em keep on thinking for a while that we don't know nothing. Our old bunch'll soon be here and the Escolante Cowmen's Association is linking up with other associations up north there. We'll soon be organized proper for war."

They arrived home a little before sundown to find their guests had left an hour before. Jase Huggins was feverish and suffering pain in his side, but became angry in his refusal when Ben was insistent on sending for an Escolante doctor.

"It'd jest git out and around to them devils that they winged me," Jase said. "Don't let 'em have that much to gloat over. It's hurtin' 'cause it's healin' back together. It'll be fit as a colt in two-three days."

It was somewhat longer than his predicted "two-three days," but Jase was a good judge of his own recuperative powers. By the time Pat Dooley and "Gander" Plunkett rode in from Purvis at the end of the week he was ready to celebrate the reunion as wildly as Craigie and the arriving pair. He winced but little under the severe backslappings and bear hugs he had to endure and he wasted as much gun powder and good bullets as any one of the others. In fact, it sounded for a little while that Friday afternoon as if the Sugar Bowl was the center of a terrible gun battle.

Harpy Horner and Silent Smith arrived on Saturday while Ben was

away in Escolante at an Association meeting. Harpy came in playing his mouthharp, which had given him his nickname; Silent whispered his greetings and seemed as happy as the others in spite of his noiseless manner. A bullet had cut vital speech organs years before and he had no longer been able to talk or sing to cattle. Thereafter he had made himself the best cook that ever kept a hungry crew of cowboys contented and it was in this capacity that he now came to the Sugar Bowl.

LIFE began to take on a faster tempo in the valley as the former Boston crew members flocked in. Horseshoe Manning arrived like the storm he promised in his telegram and Ben had to warn his men to save their ammunition for other targets than the blue sky. He put them to work getting in a big supply of stovewood for Silent Smith's bunkhouse kitchen.

By the end of the next week twelve men had arrived. Two of them were extras whom Ben had never seen and had not sent for. They were partners of some of his old hands and had come along on the chance that Ben would use them. He explained that this would very likely be a fighting job and that he could not pay fighting men's wages. They very gladly elected to stay for regular wages. This gave Ben fourteen riders, counting himself. Silent Smith made a fifteenth man who would be a reliable home guard.

An inventory displayed eighteen hip-guns, sixteen of which were .45's. Silent Smith possessed a pair of .38's, double-action quickies which had long ago earned him respect and a wide berth from trouble-hunters. There were seven Winchesters and an old Army Springfield that had come along in saddle scabbards with the men. Betty Lee gave Ben two .38 Winchesters and two 45.90's of her father's old stock.

It was Friday afternoon and the noisily jesting force of men in the long bunkhouse were busy as beavers working over their guns and taking stock of their supplies of ammunition under Ben's direction. He kept one of the 45.90's for himself and gave out the three other rifles Betty had furnished. Bluff, loud-speaking Horseshoe Manning, with a burst of laughter that came forth like a clap of thunder, asked Ben:

"What the devil we gonna do, Ben, when we git all slicked and shined up with these here shootin' irons and artil'ry. 'Bout 'nough spavined beef on the place to tempt a half dozen starvin' Apaches. When are we gonna have some real herds to work with and watch over with all these long shooters?"

He was fingering the 45.90 Ben had given him. Ben had not yet talked with all the newly arrived men about his plans. He told Horseshoe while the others listened:

"You'll start out Monday morning to drive in three thousand breeders from other ranches that are down the San Juan, west, and out east and southeast of Escolante. Our real work begins when we get all them cattle in here. The buzzards have been sorta quiet on their roosts around the Sugar Bowl since Watt and Jase give 'em a peppering, but they worked on Tom Krutch last week, snaking three hundred head from his herds over below Ute Canyon."

BEN SPENT the week-end riding among the other ranches, completing his deals for cattle. Most of the following week was consumed in the hard work of cutting out the purchased cows, driving them into Sugar Bowl valley and scattering them properly below and above the ranch headquarters. Ben was on edge now, for he knew that the test with the ghost rustlers might come at any time after his herds were displayed about the valley.

He put four men on night watch, one stationed on the north mesa rim and one on the east mesa. They were given instructions to signal with fire when and if necessary. The two other men were to ride the valley. At dawn they would all come in to report and sleep.

On Saturday there was to be a se-

cret meeting of the Cowmen's Association in Escolante. For that same night Ben and Betty were invited to a housewarming at the Bollingers' temporary Escolante home which they had taken a short distance from the Blynn home. Mrs. Bollinger had arrived; Emmet Vargas had installed the crusher machinery at the mine and begun production of ore that assayed richly. Horace Bollinger was serene and quite content that Lucy had persuaded him to come for a personal inspection of his mining property; Lucy was excited and supremely happy in preparation for the biggest party she had ever celebrated. Escolante, although farther from big cities than Antelope Springs, was turning into a much more stirring, lively place than the little rancher-farmer town they called their permanent home.

Ben and Watt Craigie rode to town Saturday morning. Because of his fine tenor singing voice, Watt was honored by Lucy with an invitation to her party. Secretly, Lucy also wanted to efface from Ben's memory the resentment he had shown once when she spoke slightingly of his "smelly, sweat-stained cowboys."

Ben and Watt wore their hip guns into town. Marshal Sucher saw them and said nothing when Ben waved him a cool greeting. In recent visits to town Ben had seen nothing of any Orkin men and had been unable to learn if Harry Pike had gone to the Oh-Kay ranch out in the northwest valley. Neither had he seen Barr Orkin. When he and Watt Craigie went into a hardware store on the south side of the square they saw Bill Marlin and Joe Needham, Orkin riders, coming from a saloon two doors east. The two Orkin men recognized them and came ambling into the hardware store while Ben gave orders to a clerk for an extensive supply of ammunition.

Ben finished his order, paid for it and said to the clerk: "Our wagon man, Silent Smith, who talks in a whisper, will come in for the stuff later." He saw Bill Marlin listening and added: "One or the other of us two will be with him when he comes for it."

He turned to go out and came face to face with the two Orkin men. Bill Marlin's wide frame stood in the center of the passageway. The big fellow seemed to have had too many drinks. His close-set eyes were red, his heavy face flushed.

"Hello, Ben Boston," he said and didn't offer to move aside. "You forgot your jail pardner? Must be gonna do some big huntin', gettin' in all that am'nition."

Ben halted in front of him. Craigie was just behind; Joe Needham stood back of Marlin, looking around at Ben. Ben said:

"The Bowl's sorta running over with skunks. We aim to do some exterminating when the skunks come outa their holes again. Where's your pardner, Bangy?"

BEN HAD a grim, hard look on his face as he locked with Marlin's bloodshot eyes. Marlin's bare, protruding teeth sucked air for a moment while he glared at Ben in seeming doubt about something he had come to do. Then he stood aside without a word and let the two men pass.

At one o'clock Ben and Craigie finished lunch together in a restaurant. Craigie was to keep in circulation around the square after helping Silent Smith load his wagon with supplies. Ben slipped away to a meeting with Waldo Beckett and other Association members in an empty store room back of the bank block. At Ben's special request Beckett had failed to notify Barr Orkin of the meeting.

A new member, whom Ben had not previously met, was at the meeting. Beckett introduced him to Ben as Bob Kane, manager-foreman of the 8-in-a-Diamond.

"Kane's been having plenty trouble with the sheepmen 'round his big spread over toward Purvis, Ben," Beckett explained. "'Tween sheep and rustlers, we cowmen've got enough trouble to fill a right big corner o' hell in this country."

Kane said to Ben: "I hear Jubal

Hockaday is sorta been lookin' at your mesa grassland with hungry sheep eyes, Boston. He's li'ble to be grazin' that mesa this summer if you don't watch out."

"I aim to do that," Ben declared.

He was studying Bob Kane while the talk went on with other men. Kane was a stocky, round-headed, short-necked man with pale red hair and a florid, freckled face. His stubby hands had red hair and big splotches of freckles on them. Ben remembered his stop-over at the 8-in-a-Diamond and what he had observed there, but he did not tell Kane that he had enjoyed his bunkhouse hospitality. Maybe the boss of the 8-in-a-Diamond had been away when that bunch of riders came up from the south and put in for a stop-over at his ranch.

Beckett called the meeting of eight men to order and said: "Some of us have been talking over plans for cleaning up this country. One of our newest members has got some ideas. We'll listen now to Ben Boston."

He sat down and Ben arose to speak.

"GENTLEMEN," he said, "what I got to say won't be much. It's what me and you do, if we agree, that will count. You ranchers in this country have been losing to rustlers for a long time. Mostly you haven't got any of your cows back that was rustled. The few you got back was mostly meant for you to find easy out south, toward desert country. That was a trick to lead you in the wrong direction. I've done a little riding 'round this country and I've asked a lot of questions. All of you say your rustled beef was run south. I say it was run north, or northeast, into the hilly, broken country where there's grass and no deserts, and worked off to market from there after vented brands healed enough to look natural. The agent at Purvis told me that a lot of cattle have been shipped from a new stockyard chute out east of Purvis, more than you Escolante stockmen have loaded at Purvis—and I hear that the country east of Purvis isn't good cattle country. How about it?"

"We never tracked any missing beef in that direction, Boston," Tom Krutch declared skeptically. "Waldo and me are out east, with the Nehi Mountains 'tween us and the north country you talk about. Nat and Rufe are down the San Juan, with the Oh-Kay and 8-in-a-Diamond barrin' 'em off. We all lost plenty beef."

"You and Mr. Beckett had your biggest losses last fall and the fall before. You sold a few cattle that was driven through Ute Pass, supposedly for use up at the Indian reservation. Right after the bought cattle were shoved through the Pass you found a lot more cattle missing than you had sold, but you naturally couldn't track them, because they'd been hazed through Ute Pass ahead of the lawful bought herds. That's what happened to your three hundred missing head just the other day. Ute Pass is pretty well hoof-worn. I saw its south end recent."

He told them then of how he and Craigie had followed the small band of rustlers from the Bowl to Ute Pass.

"But how do you 'count for the cows rustled from the Sugar Bowl and from down the San Juan?" Rufe Gibbons argued. "They sure couldn't a been run 'round to Ute Canyon and the Pass, and they never was run up the cuts in your east mesa wall."

"That's for us to find out," Ben replied grimly. "I want to know if you men will join in a plumb thorough scouting out of the north country. I hear there are plenty of canyons and narrow, grassy valleys over there. We've got to know what's in 'em."

Beckett said: "Bob Kane ought to know that country. What do you think of the idea, Kane?"

"There ain't grass enough in the rocky country northeast of the 8-in-a-Diamond to keep a goat alive," Kane said without looking at Ben, "and it'd take a mountain goat or a burro to climb through the rocks over in there. Our trouble on the 8-in-a-Diamond is sheep, not rustlers, which I think proves that the rustlers work from

the deserts down south and count on the wind hidin' trail for 'em. It ain't so far over to grass in Arizony and New Mexico."

Ben didn't press his argument. He felt resentment against Bob Kane and in the realization of his growing suspicion of the 8-in-a-Diamond man he felt angry with himself for being overly suspicious. He couldn't condemn himself for suspecting Barr Orkin of some devious connection, at least, with the rustlers, not since overhearing him and Harry Pike's few words with each other, but to go on suspecting everybody else whom he met was ridiculous. The meeting finally broke up without any definite decisions.

CHAPTER XV

EVERYBODY of importance in and around Escolante came to Lucy's party. There were town people, ranchers, mining engineers, mine stock and lease brokers, machinery salesmen and two banker friends of Horace Bollinger's who had come from Denver to look over the mining district. Sheriff Lemming came after Lucy told him that Marshal Gordon Sucher was not invited.

Ben Boston tired of meeting people whose names he could not remember a half minute after shaking hands with them. He was bothered by the delay of Betty Lee and Watt Craigie in coming. Puzzling over that, he wandered out on the porch where Sheriff Lemming was in a discussion with Waldo Beckett and Rufe Gibbons about Ben's ideas concerning the rustlers. The sheriff agreed with the ranchers that everything had pointed to a south desert trail for the stolen cattle in the past and tried to get Ben into an argument.

"Maybe I'm all wrong," Ben said, "but I don't believe it yet. I aim to get proof that I'm right and show it to you men. I hope you'll give me the help then that I'm asking for. Look who's coming in!"

He spoke the last sentence in lower tone and nodded toward the front steps. He and his companions stood in half darkness at the bend of the wide porch. The inside of the big house was well lighted for the gathering crowd of people in there and the glare of light reached out to the walk before the front steps. Barr Orkin came up the steps with a woman companion who was dressed in a long-skirted black evening gown, the sheen of which in the lamp light indicated expensive velvet. Something like jewels sparkled on the pink slippers that peeped out from under the skirt as she walked on the other side of Orkin toward the door to the drawing room. Ben could not see her face because of Orkin's shoulders, but the light reflected flame from a Spanish comb in her black hair.

"He's got plenty of his boundin' nerve with him," John Lemming snorted, "'scortin' Betty Lee here after what you told me 'bout him and Harry Pike."

Ben suddenly went cold all over. He left his three companions and walked inside. Lucy was greeting Betty and Orkin, then she began introducing them to some who were strangers to them. Several minutes were consumed when some of the women, who had known Betty a long time, went into raptures over her beautiful dress. They spoke as if stunned with surprise about the miraculous change in her appearance. Ben stood quietly at one side of the large room, partly hidden by others, watching Betty with incredulous eyes. He did not see Orkin's pleased smile cast in his direction as the Oh-Kay owner talked with Horace Bollinger.

After a long time the excitement over Betty's coming died down enough to give Ben his chance. He started toward where she stood talking to the Blynn sisters. The side of her face was turned his way. He didn't believe she had yet seen him, but when he was still five steps away she turned as if knowing all the time where he was and what he was doing. She came to meet him, a slow, faint smile dispelling some of the dark wistfulness in her eyes. A skillful application of face powder had soft-

ened the sun tan on her face. Her brilliant black hair was done in a careful coiffure that fitted well into the contour of her head. She wore her unusual finery with as natural grace as she had shown in her trim riding costume.

"How do you like the ugly duckling in fine feathers, Ben?" she asked as he took her proffered hands and looked at her from head to foot.

LUCY BOLLINGER, talking with some of her guests in the wide entryway to the dining room, looked toward Ben and Betty with a small frown on her pretty brow, but Ben did not see her then. He pressed Betty's hands and laughed shortly, catching his breath.

He said: "If anybody but you ever called you an ugly duckling, Betty, I'd sure think them plenty foolish and blind. You're the prettiest sight around here tonight. I sure didn't know you when you came in. But why did you come with Orkin? I thought Jase was to drive you in."

"I wanted to surprise you, Ben—that is, I wanted to surprise everybody. I haven't tried to dress up any since father died. I came in early to do my shopping and put up at the hotel. I couldn't think of coming to this party in the plain old clothes I've had so long. Barr saw me at the hotel and begged me to let him bring me here. We had supper together in the hotel dining room. Please don't look at me that way, Ben. I couldn't be—I couldn't act any other way with him when he seems so anxious to be friendly."

Ben was still frowning, very much displeased when he asked: "Did he say anything about Harry Pike?"

"Yes. I asked him and he said he's seen nothing of Harry."

"I believe he's lying," Ben said through gritting teeth, "but let it ride at that for a while. I hope you're not staying in his hotel overnight."

"It's not his any longer, Ben. He told me he sold it and the Golden Horn saloon place to Gordon Sucher, but someone else at the hotel told me that Sucher won them from Barr in a card game last night. That's nothing new, though. Sucher has won the Oh-Kay ranch from Barr two or three times and then lost it back to him."

"You call him by his first name, Betty, just as if you like him a lot."

"He was always friendly with my father and he began asking me years ago to call him by his first name."

"When he begun asking you to marry him, eh?"

She looked up at him with a little wrinkle of impatience between her eyes and said: "He didn't ask me to marry him until after my father died. He knew father didn't want him to marry me because he's so much older and because he's a gambler."

"And a lot of other things," Ben growled low. "Here comes the nervy cuss now."

Orkin and Horace Bollinger came toward them, Orkin with a hand extended to Ben. The latter took the hand unimpressively.

"How're you, Boston?" Orkin greeted, friendly enough. "Sorry I had to miss the special association meeting today. Hear you're going right ahead getting plenty riders and cattle onto the Sugar Bowl."

Ben tried to hide his surprise, wondering suddenly how Orkin had learned about the special meeting. He replied with assumed indifference: "We're getting fixed pretty well, Orkin, thanks."

"With all the big force you're getting in," Orkin went on, watching Ben's face, "you must be figuring on stocking up pretty heavy. I'll sell you the breeders out of my fall beef crop if you want 'em, and on any easy terms you name. There oughta be about a thousand young cows in the bunch."

"That's right generous of you. I'll see how we come out 'tween now and fall. Maybe—"

HE DIDN'T go on with what he would say, but stopped to turn and follow the glances of Horace Bollinger and Orkin. There was questioning doubt on Mr. Bollinger's face as he gazed at a cowboy figure with chaps and big peaked hat coming through the front door. The cowboy was plainly not an invited guest. Betty Lee stepped aside as

the new arrival swooped up to Ben without a look at the others.

"You're Ben Boston, ain't you?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Your waddy, named Craigie, wants you to come over to the livery stable right away. Some sorta trouble. I gotta hurry back in town."

He turned and ran out the door while many people looked their astonishment. Ben started toward the door and called to the man, but the latter had disappeared out the front gate.

"Who was he?" Ben asked Orkin. Orkin looked blank and shook his head.

"Stranger to me," he declared. "Must've been one of Gibbons' men. Think I've seen 'im about town once or twice."

Ben walked swiftly back through the long dining room into the kitchen where his gun and belt were piled with other similar paraphernalia on a side table. Lucy and Betty came after him, asking questions. He shook his head and mumbled his lack of knowledge about the matter while he buckled on his gun belt.

"Get Square John to go with you, Ben," Betty pleaded.

Ben shook his head and answered: "Why spoil the sheriff's night for him over nothing. Watt's prob'ly got drunk and gambled his horse and saddle off—the redheaded devil! I'll be back soon, Lucy."

He went out a rear door to keep the people in front from seeing him leave wearing a gun. It was only a few blocks into the center of town and the livery stable, therefore he walked, leaving Skillet in the Bollinger stable.

The business places around the square were well lighted and obviously well patronized by the Saturday night throngs, but the blacksmith shop and livery stable were in darkness. Ben entered the wide, dark center of the open blacksmith shop and went slowly on toward the still darker livery stable at the rear. The main entrance to the stable was from the cross street on the south, but Ben had become used to going in through the smithy.

The bare ground of the smithy floor had a layer of soft dust that cushioned his footsteps. He came to the back end and stood behind the wall there as he called Craigie's name. Someone in the livery stable beyond laughed and then called answer: "Come on and get 'im outa this manger, Boston. He's dead drunk. We cain't do nothin' with 'im."

Ben had never known Craigie to get down and out under a load of liquor so quickly. Besides that, the redheaded youth had promised him not to touch whiskey tonight. He was suspicious.

"Why not light a lantern back there?" he asked and then heard a struggling groan that sounded, even under its muffled strain, like Watt Craigie's throat gurgles. He drew his gun.

Tensed, with every nerve alarmed and on guard, he leaped across into the black darkness of the stable entrance. A gun snapped out two roaring shots, pointing flames of light toward him; one bullet jerked viciously on his coat collar. He fell into an empty stall and fired at the ghostly figure revealed by the flashes of gun flame in a stall obliquely across from him. Two other guns joined in the battle from down the runway. The boards of the stall just above his head crashed and splinters tickled his cheek and neck. The first man did not fire again, or had moved over with the others.

HE COULD not leave the stall the way he had come in without giving some shadowy revelation of his going. Instead, he pulled himself up over the manger and crawled noiselessly through to the next manger while more shots roared, searching him out, and horses somewhere down the stable lunged and screamed in their fright. He stood crouched in the manger and saw two men creeping toward where they thought he lay in hiding. One of them fired over the bent form of the other in front. Ben snapped two quick shots

down at them, so close he didn't believe a miss was possible.

A horse in the next stall kicked the boards and whinnied wildly; terrified yells of a man and a short cry of pain from another mixed in the moment of bedlam following Ben's fast shots. Then a man was running pell-mell out the far entrance. From down the line of stalls and mangers in which he crouched, Ben heard a repetition, more insistent now, of Watt Craigie's faintly familiar groans. He knew then that those muffled moanings said his cowboy was bound and gagged.

Several men were shouting to each other above the noise of their approach through the blacksmith shop. Then they quieted suddenly as one voice among them called for silence. That voice was Sheriff Lemming's and he called Ben's name.

"I'm in the stable!" Ben replied. "Get lights 'fore you come in. They tried to 'bush me here!"

"You young fool!" Lemming yelled. "Why'd you come out'n me? It's a good thing the gals tol' me! Where're the ambushers?"

Lights flashed in the smithy as several matches were struck in search for a lantern. Ben called that the ambushers were dead, gone, or hiding. The sheriff came stalking into the stable, a lantern held aloft and partly back of him as he peered ahead. A dozen cautious men came behind, one of whom held another lantern. Ben saw the still form of a man sprawled in the passage near his hiding place as the sheriff spied it and shouted, coming close.

While the sheriff bent over the motionless figure, Ben stepped out of the manger. He heard the muffled call again from farther along the stalls. Lemming heard them, straightened suddenly and stared questioningly at Ben, flashing the lantern into the latter's face. In his own hand he gripped a six-gun.

"What's that groanin'?" he asked Ben.

"Let's go see," Ben prompted without revealing his belief that it was Watt Craigie. He started away briskly.

"You stay low where you are while I look," Lemming commanded and shoved Ben back forcefully into the stall. The other men crowded up around the dead man, then some of them followed down the passageway at the sheriff's call.

There was a spell of confused ejaculations and shouts down where the sheriff went in toward a manger. Above the hubbub Ben, peering over the tops of the stalls, heard someone calling for a knife. A moment later Watt Craigie's voice was released suddenly from a muffling groan into a loud wail.

"Gosh damn!" he yelled. "They grabbed me when I come to get my bronc! They hog-tied and gagged me and throwed me in here!"

He stopped, apparently to wet his dried mouth and throat. The sheriff was cutting his other thongs while he asked him another question. Craigie struggled up to a standing position in the manger

"O' course I was here all the time!" he replied testily, coming out of the stall looking for Ben. "I heard 'em lyin' to Ben that I was drunk. I knew they aimed to bushwhack 'im. I grunted like hell agin them gags, but they started shootin' at him. Then—. Hey, where's Ben? Is he all right?"

BEN STEPPED out and with some effort rolled the dead man over on his back as he answered Craigie: "I'm all right, Watt, but they sure tried to get me after you groaned a warning—. Good holy Jupiter!"

The ring of onlookers let out a loud chorus of shouts, seconding Ben's cry of consternation. The sheriff shoved past Craigie and others to get sight of the face on the floor at which startled Ben Boston was looking, then he bellowed:

"Gordon Sucher! What the tom-tom wailin' hell's this about?"

The sheriff stooped and ran a hand under Sucher's shirt to feel of his chest for a moment while everybody stood in silent amazement. The sheriff straightened with blood on his hand and said: "He's stone dead. Did

you know who you was shootin' at, Boston?"

"Not a bit, sheriff," Ben declared coolly. "They begun shooting at me first, and they sure knew who I was." He gave a quick detail of all that happened after he left the party. He showed the bullet tear on the left side of his coat collar to prove he was the target of the gunmen.

Lemming turned on Watt Craigie and asked: "Did you know who they was when they grabbed you, Craigie?"

"No, sir," Watt replied with emphatic shake of head. "There was three of 'em and one never spoke a word. That musta been Sucher keeping shut 'cause he knew I'd savvy his voice."

"You say, Boston, that only one of the three run off?" Lemming asked. "The other'n must be hidin' in here somewhere." He began to look around the stable, puzzled. Others started searching glances. The man with the second lantern, standing on the fringe of the crowd, yelled:

"Here's a feller lyin' over in this stall!"

Lemming and Ben brushed ahead of the others and saw the form of a small man lying doubled up on dirty straw in the stall whence had come the first shots at Ben. The sheriff felt of the prostrate form and said one word: "Dead!" He turned the man's face up.

"Blackie Yewdell!" several voices chorused with the sheriff's own exclamation of the name.

"He's the feller that was with Orkin's man, Joe Needham, the day of the Sugar Bowl auction, sheriff," Ben Boston said. "I saw them mozeying around with their heads together."

"Yeah," Lemming confirmed, looking down at the dead man. "They was at the auction, itself, standin' right close up to scare Huggins outa biddin' for you. Blackie was a killer that's been hangin' 'round town since the mines started up—come down from Purvis. No use tryin' to tie 'im up with Orkin, Boston. He run with Sucher's crowd here and his gun was for hire to anybody with the price. I'm right glad I won't have 'im in my hair no more. Jenkins, you take charge here. Four o' you fellers grab Yewdell and four others take holt o' Sucher. Yank 'em over to Newton's corpse parlor. Come on, Ben."

He led Ben and Craigie across to his office before he spoke again. Behind closed doors there he spoke:

"Ben, I ain't much for tears and soft stuff and if I was, I wouldn't shed much over Gordon Sucher. Of course I didn't like him one little bit, but if I had the least suspicion that shootin' wasn't like you fellers said, I'd hold you for the court. I know you told it straight and, furthermore, I know something else that had me stumped, but I can see it straighter now.

"LAST Thursday Barr Orkin deeded the hotel and Golden Horn over to Sucher. It was supposed to be for a gamblin' debt at poker Wednesday night. I happen to know Gordon Sucher didn't set in on no poker game any time Wednesday night, and I know that Sucher never done a thing for Orkin that he didn't make the skunk pay for in advance, him not trustin' Orkin no more'n that. Orkin's kept his skirts clear, but they're gettin' closer and closer to mud. Orkin means to get your scalp, Ben, and he's got plenty big reason to hurry the job. You got any suspicion 'bout why he's so all-fired jigged up to do it?"

Ben shook his head slowly, but seemed to be thinking as he replied: "I didn't tell you before, sheriff, because it was out of your bailiwick, but it was me that killed them two fellers a while back at the Purvis hotel. They tried to loop me that night. Bangy was an Orkin man. The others may have been, maybe not. That and this tonight proves it's a gang out to get me. I've wondered a lot of times why Orkin would risk himself and all he's got tying in with the rustler syndicate. I heard from Betty Lee and you tonight that he's an up and down gambler. He's rich one day and durn near busted the next. That explains a lot."

He paused and the expression on his face showed that he was mulling

over something in his mind. He suddenly sat forward, staring into Lemming's face with greater intensity and exclaimed:

"Sheriff, did they have a reason to try this tonight in a hurry. How the devil did Orkin find out about the secret meeting of the Association today like he told me, sort of soft like, at the party? He wasn't supposed to know about the meeting because I asked Beckett not to tell him. He knows we suspect him some, anyhow, and he knows what we talked about, or rather what I wanted done.

"You and the others won't believe the rustled cows go north. They know that I believe that and that I'm going on their trail. They must've been watching Watt and me the day we went over the north mesa wall and found out how they run a blind trail up there. And when I went on to Purvis, they thought I was out to scout in the right direction. Sheriff, we're gonna find the rustlers up north of them Nehi Mountains!" He stood up. Watt Craigie's face beamed.

"Not so loud, son," Lemming warned, arising with hand unlifted in a cautioning gesture. "These walls might have ears. All right. Next time any cows come missing, we'll track north. I never liked rompin' around that dadblasted dry desert country down south, nohow. One thing more 'fore we bust up. Keep your eyes out for that ranny that come to the Bollingers after you tonight. He was likely the third man in that ambush. I never saw him before. If you can bring him to me, we'll make the dirty sheep tick talk plenty."

They went with Craigie to get his horse at the livery stable and then all three hurried to the Bollinger house to see if Orkin was still there. He was there, one of the most innocent-looking and rapt members of the audience that listened to Betty Lee's offering on the piano. His brow lifted minutely when he saw Boston, but that was all.

Evidently Lucy had persuaded Betty to play. Ben stepped into the room of silent listeners in time to hear the black-haired girl's last masterful notes. A burst of clapping hands and pleased exclamations filled the air. People crowded around Betty Lee. Emmet Vargas, who had come since Ben left, rushed over and seized Ben's hand, crying:

"Congratulations, Boston! I envy you your living in the same house with Miss Lee where you can hear such wonderful music often. Man alive! That young lady can play the classics like nobody in this country! Why, she went right through the Mozart concerto in D minor as easy as a honky-tonk thumper plays 'Turkey in the Straw'."

Vargas rushed away to offer his praise to Betty Lee. Ben, watching Barr Orkin, said to Lemming and Craigie: "I don't savvy what Vargas was saying about Betty's playing, but I saw a twitch on Gambler Orkin's for'ed when he saw me that was like a thunderbolt, coming from a poker player."

"That means he ain't been told yet what happened to his pardner, Gordon Sucher," Sheriff Lemming said. "Don't let on we got eyes his way."

CHAPTER XVI

IT WAS after two o'clock Sunday morning when Betty Lee, Ben Boston and Watt Craigie rode homeward from Escolante. Betty had gone to the hotel and changed back to her riding clothes. Watt carried her bundle of fine clothes tied back of his saddle. Ben told Betty as they rode, side by side, about the latest attempt on his life. She listened in silence and he marveled again at the great difference between her and volubile, excitable Lucy Bollinger. And tonight he had seen that she could be as lovely, in her very different way, as Lucy was.

A long time after he had finished his story she said: "What are you going to do, Ben? They'll keep on trying until they do kill you. Gordon Sucher was a close friend of Barr Orkin's."

He knew then why she had thought so long over his story before speaking. He told her: "Betty, I know you still think Orkin is just hard,

but on the level. You wouldn't look at him if you really thought he was back of all this and has been all along, ever since your dad's time. Well, I won't ask you to believe me yet, but please sorta put him on probation—don't let him come prowling around too much when I'm away. When wash day comes you might see some Orkin clothes on the line."

She didn't speak again until they had put up the horses and Ben was preparing to nap for an hour on the sofa in the big front room of the house.

"Please tell Mrs. Mester I want to ride away from here by sun-up," he told Betty. "I'm gonna look into that cattle trail I saw up in the edge of sheep country, then I'll know how to point the scouting further on with more men."

Betty came over to where he stood by the sofa and put hands up to his coat lapels, then quietly fingered with the tear made on his collar by Blackie Yewdell's bullet. He stood looking down into her face and saw the tautness of her lips and the old darkening sorrow in her eyes again.

Her lips finally opened with a little quiver and she said: "Ben, I feel very strangely depressed tonight and it isn't just because you had to kill more men. While at the hotel, before I ate supper with Barr Orkin, I had a premonition of something terrible about to happen. Maybe it was that you were in danger, but I still feel it, worse than ever, just like I felt before father's death. Do you remember what you said about wanting a little sister? You're more than just a big brother to Buster and me; you're guardian, father, big brother and—." He saw a tear drop from her long lashes as she leaned her face against his chest while her hands gripped tightly on his coat lapels. She finished in a whisper he could barely hear because of her huskiness: "Please be careful, Ben, and don't take any chances."

He put his arms around her and spoke close to her ear: "Betty, don't cry, little sister. It's not like the Betty Lee I know to do that. Of course, I won't take no fool chances, but I've got things to do—a lot of things to do for our Sugar Bowl outfit here."

She lifted her head and looked at him with glitter of tears in her eyes, then she put hands on both sides of his face and kissed him. Without hesitating to think of what he was doing, he pressed her closely in his arms and prolonged the kiss, feeling her tears moisten his face. For a length of time he could not have measured, he held her in the embrace, blinded by a thrill which dizzied him.

At last he let his arms slacken their hold and turned his face aside. She heard him say: "Forgive me, Betty. I hadn't any right to do that."

"Because you're engaged to Lucy Bollinger?" she asked in a voice that was unsteady.

"I guess we're sort of engaged yet. I don't know what'll come of it, Betty. I wish—"

He didn't finish explaining his wish, though she waited a moment after he dropped his arms from about her. She brushed tears from her eyes and turned away.

"Good night, Ben. I'll wake Mrs. Mester before I lie down."

She went up the stairs without looking back at him, although he watched her until the last sight of her disappeared.

AT SUN-UP Ben had a fresh horse saddled, ready to ride away. Buster was in the barn yard begging for the privilege of riding out the day with Ben. Jase Huggins stood near.

"I'll be riding too far and hard for you, younker," Ben told the importuning boy. "We'll ride the valley together tomorrow and count our cattle. How's that, old top?"

"All right, Ben," Buster agreed, "but I'm gonna look 'em over today, clear up to the falls. I went up there yesterday and they're going for that sweet grass above the long cut just like our other cattle always done."

"Careful, pardner," Ben warned and leaned from the saddle to tousle Buster's mop of hair. "Don't take no chances."

He started to ride away, thinking

of Betty Lee's plea to him not to take chances. He drew up a short distance away and called back to Jase Huggins: "When the watchers come in this morning, Jase, tell 'em to take tonight off. You put out four others this evening from the day force."

On his way toward the Cliff Dweller ruins and the river in the upper country, Ben rode close to the mesa rim. A quarter of a mile east of the waterfalls, above the curving corner of the valley, he looked down upon several hundred head of his cattle busily grazing on the sweet mat-grass between the long cut and the falls, just as Buster had described. Even at that distance he could see some cows drinking where the cold, clear stream rushed out from the cataract pool.

It was already past eight o'clock. With a day's riding ahead, the length of which he could not yet judge, Ben put the tough mustang into an easy lope across the partly timbered, smooth country. There was a gradual climb, but no rough going. He kept far enough back from the flat, nearly straight river course not to be seen by any spying eyes over in the sheep country until he came within sight of the high, desolate ruins of the ancient people.

He crossed the river a half mile below where the two men had challenged him on his return from Purvis. This put him in unfriendly territory. He became more alert, taking advantage of every swale in the terrain and what scarce timber there was. From a clump of cedars on the high ground above the old dry river bed he surveyed the country for several minutes. There was no moving object in sight other than two chattering magpies in cottonwood tops that were below him in the canyon.

The descent into the river course was definitely here. Ben wondered why the deep cut of the canyon which the ancient river had made seemed to point toward the Sugar Bowl and yet it did not split the solid country into the Bowl. It evidently came to an end somewhere below, for he and Buster had once ridden across practically level country above the falls of the present river course. He guided the sliding, snorting mustang down into the canyon bottom. Again he noticed the evidences of cattle driving that had worn the old river bed bare of plant life.

THERE came into his mind a suspicion that he was stumbling on a great discovery. He sat his saddle studying the ground and wondering which way he should go. He wanted to know if this cattle trail started in some mysterious manner out of the Sugar Bowl, utterly impossible as that seemed. Then his roving eyes recognized several fresh horse tracks. Slowly he disentangled the mixed hoof prints and estimated that seven, maybe eight riders had gone down the canyon during the night or this morning, for the sun had not dried the disturbed soil disclosing their passage.

He did not wish to become involved with such a large force of riders alone and therefore decided to continue on his original errand. That was to explore this mysterious cattle trail as far toward its destination as he could in one day's ride. If it turned down to the Purvis road, his theory would be partly shattered; but if it led northeastward into the country Bob Kane had said would not support a mountain goat, then he would have discovered something.

Ben had every expectation of encountering sheepmen as he went on the cattle drive trail beyond where it turned out of the river course. No one challenged him. After three miles he came to where the fresh tracks of those other horses had come into the trail from the west, but the still definitely marked cattle trail swerved around the foot of the Nehi Mountains there, turning to the northeast. The trail crossed country that was high above Jubal Hockaday's valley sheep lands, country that became rougher and rougher with each mile.

Gradually the slope of the terrain changed from a westerly direction until he was riding with the wooded heights of the Nehis on his right and broken lower country was north. Still

the course of many cattle drives remained the same clearly marked route. At midday he had reached a section of country eight or ten miles northeastward of the west abutment of the Nehis and was following the trail down a long, straight canyon.

Suddenly he came to the end of the canyon wall on his right. Another canyon and another cattle trail from the south joined here with the canyon trail he had followed. The widened course, a hundred yards across in the bottom, turned to the west and spilled out into a grassy bottomed bowl that was, in so far as he could see, a miniature replica of Sugar Bowl. Without a moment's conjecture, Ben was sure that the second cattle trail came from Ute Pass. Cattle had been driven over it since the last spring rains.

Reaching a point at the mouth of the canyon where he could see out into the full stretch of low grassland, he drew back quickly on his pony's reins. He swung the pony in behind a jutting rock point, hoping he had not been seen. A house, with a pole fence around it, and several men moving about had come suddenly within his view. He dismounted for a better survey, sticking his head above the ledge of rock. It was a hundred yards down to the house. A horse corral was just beyond, containing two dozen horses, with numerous saddles hanging on the fence. The bowl of grassland, not over a half mile across, narrowed into a bottleneck of another canyon at the far end.

"Just a temporary way station on the rustler trail," Ben mused to himself, "and a tough, long night or day's drive from the Bowl or Ute Canyon. They must use plenty of men to haze cows this far without a grazing stop."

He had found more than he had hoped to find. Fearful that a longer stay would expose his presence, he mounted and rode more swiftly over his back trail than he had come. He stopped where the two cattle trails met and watered his pony in a pool of the small stream which came down the canyon from Ute Pass. After a moment's debate whether to go homeward by Ute Pass or the way he had come he decided to follow the latter course and investigate the reason for these riders in the old river course.

TWO hours later he was skirting the western end of the Nehis, going across the mouth of a wooded canyon that opened a crack up into the Nehis at his left. His tired pony, that had been jogging along with sagging neck, lifted his head, perked his ears forward, sampling the west wind with flaring nostrils. Without waiting to wonder over the pony's sudden peartening, Ben spurred him and reined sharply off up the shaded, brush-filled canyon. He didn't want to meet anyone on this trail and have it known that he was finding out so much. He knew his pony had smelled something on that wind. He hitched the animal to a bush, took the 45.90 from its scabbard and went back to reconnoiter. Within twenty yards of the wide trail he heard the coming of riders around the foot of the next ridge and dropped behind a high rock.

A few seconds later he stood glued to the rock, tingling with amazement. Barr Orkin and Bob Kane, the 8-in-a-Diamond foreman-manager, came into view, riding side by side. They were watching the ground in silence. When they came to where Ben had just turned his pony off the trail, Kane spoke and pointed:

"Looky, Barr! He went and come and he's turned up this crack in the mountain and mighty damned recent, too. Let's have a look."

Without a word, Barr Orkin turned his horse with Kane and both came directly toward Ben, their two pairs of eyes scanning the wooded canyon above. Ben cocked the hammer of the 45.90 and slid the long barrel over the top of the rock.

"Back up, gents!" he called and the two horsemen jerked reins to an abrupt halt. "Just trot along your peaceful way and keep going down the east trail without a back look as far as a forty-five-ninety bullet can travel, if you want to stay healthy!"

Bob Kane had let out a bellowed "Whoa!" as he jerked back on his pony's bits, causing a little confusion. Orkin stopped his mount placidly and while he listened to Ben's speech his expression changed no more than if he had met Ben on Escolante's street.

When Ben finished his warning, Orkin said: "Why, hello, Boston. What's the meaning of such talk? We're looking for a chuckliner that run off with one of Bob's best horses this morning. If these are your tracks, then we're on a wild-goose chase and I'll be riding back."

The gambler coolness and quick wit of the man was entirely too suave to fool Ben. In fact, it was so good that it confirmed more than he was ready to suspect. He answered:

"I'm still advising you two fellers to keep right on east, Orkin. The trail's pretty clear for the next half mile and this rifle can throw straight that far. Keep on—now! No more talk!"

Orkin had started to protest. Ben leveled the Winchester menacingly. Kane backed his horse toward the trail. Orkin turned his around and the two spurred into a run. Ben went out from behind the rock to higher ground and watched the two riders until they disappeared. Then he ran to his pony, mounted and rode as fast in the other direction as the mustang could go.

He had gone less than two miles when he heard the cries of many cowboys driving cattle. There was lowing and bellowing of cows being hard pressed on the drive. The sounds came from beyond a bend in the trail, hidden by pine and cedar growth. Tingling with excitement and wonder, Ben turned off to the left. The trail along here was at some distance from the actual foothills of the Nehis and followed fairly level ground, winding somewhat to follow spaces clear of timber. Ben sunk himself into the cedar brakes and rode onward until he saw the herd and drivers.

Eight or ten men were pushing a narrowed string of cattle for all they could get out of them in the way of speed. Ben began estimating the number of the cattle as they passed a break in the trees. Gradually something familiar in the appearance of those uniformly young cows dawned upon him as he counted. They were his cows! Young breeders he had driven into the Sugar Bowl the past week!

HIS hand dropped to his .45 and a sudden jerk on the bridle reins started his mustang down toward those shouting, "Yip-yipping" cowboys. Then he halted, knowing that it would be suicide to try even to scatter the cattle. He would be killed by some of those many riders and afterward they could easily gather up his scattered herd. He waited to let them pass on. As the drag came up he heard a familiar voice from the last of the drag riders. Then Bill Marlin rode across the line of his view, waving a coiled rope to make the last of the cattle hurry along. Beside Marlin came another familiar figure to further amaze Ben Boston. Harry Pike was as lustily, vigorously working on those drag animals as was big Bill Marlin.

Ben dropped into the trail a few hundred yards farther down and rode the mustang unmercifully on the thoroughly churned back trail. Never had he heard of rustlers carrying out such a brazen steal in broad daylight. Undoubtedly they had worked on the theory that Sunday there would be a slackening of guard about the Sugar Bowl Valley. They had been aware of the night guard and had by some mysterious, unfathomable ingress and egress, reached into the upper valley for that herd as soon as the night watchers rode in to headquarters.

He rode swiftly along in futile conjecture as to how that amazingly impossible thing had been done. All he had to do was to follow this back trail of the herd and he would soon know.

His pony was sweating plentifully by the time he reached the old river bed and turned down it, still following the torn, fresh trail of his stolen cattle. Deeper and deeper the river course became until he was riding be-

tween close walls where trees no longer grew. A high wall of rock loomed up ahead after he had ridden for nearly three miles. He seemed to be at the dead end of a cul-de-sac. Then he saw a big, black opening in the lower part of the barring wall of rock before him. With a flash of comprehension that chilled him with the eeriness of its fantastic proportions, he saw back through the ages.

In the long ago the river had flowed down a depression in the mesa, cutting this canyon, but had poured into a "sink hole" there against the solid rock ahead and found its way on to the Sugar Bowl Valley below by an underground route. The old irrigating Cliff Dwellers had changed the river course and left this strange passage to dry up during the eons of time since. But where had the ancient river come into the Sugar Bowl? With that mystery still weighting him, Ben rode boldly into the black mouth of the subterranean rustler trail. Where other men had ridden and driven hundreds of cattle, he could certainly go, although the going was fearful as he passed beyond reach of the late afternoon light.

At the very mouth of the cavern, the trail dropped quickly down. The force of the waters in ancient times had dug down sharply under the hard rock above. He gave the pony his head and urged him forward. The going underfoot was solid and in most places the pony's shoes clinked on rock bottom. The air became close and the smell of cattle droppings, fresh and churned into the air, was extremely unpleasant. The mustang snorted and at times wanted to stop and turn about, but Ben forced him onward. He must solve this puzzle and hurry homeward to gather his forces. Orkin and Kane would lose little time in preparing for the pursuit they would certainly be expecting. Perhaps they had thought he would run into the herd and be killed by the rustlers driving it, but would soon learn differently.

IN HIS impatience to reach the end of the eerie cavern it seemed that he had been in it for an hour, but actually his pony walked his way in little over twenty minutes. The air freshened and finally the distant, muffled roar of falling water reached Ben's anxious ears. Then came a ray of light ahead, gray, but unmistakable. All at once he found himself riding out into light among thick brush and trees to right and left. A pool of churling water and the roar of the cataract was behind the tree growth at his left.

He brought the pony down to the smooth rock edge of the pool and saw the innumerable scratchings of cloven hoofs and shoed horse feet where the animals had been forced up from the pool onto the rock and in behind the trees growing on the soil collected during the ages in the mouth of the old river. The massive rock of the mesa wall directly ahead had deflected the river in former ages and let it escape through the fissure that was still its only exit from the pool below the falls.

Ben drove his pony into the pool and found, unexpectedly, that the water at no time came above the animal's breast as he rode out to where he and Buster had come on their first visit. Not a cow was in sight outside. The herd had grazed here, as on former occasions with the Lee herds, unsuspectingly close to the secret exit, waiting for the rustlers.

The soil by the river edges was badly torn by numberless hoofs, telling the story over again which Ben already knew. The sun was below the western rim of the valley. He put the tired pony into a lope toward home, barely able to restrain himself from driving the exhausted little mustang at a killing run.

By the time he rode up to the Sugar Bowl house it was dark in the valley. Only a faint, golden tinge held on the east mesa walls, reflecting a ghostly, pervading light. When he came close to the barn and house, he was aware of an unusual commotion and many lights about the place. A lot of people, more than the regular home folks, stirred around there.

A dozen men ran toward him as he

rode up to the barn. A lot of saddled horses were hitched here and there, apparently ready for going somewhere. Men shouted his name, shouted it as if he had come back from the dead. At first it was all confusion. Even his tired pony shied before the rush of men. Then out of the bedlam came one recognizable voice. Watt Craigie ran to his side, slapped his leg.

"Good goshawmighty, Ben!" the redhead shouted above the crazy bedlam. "They didn't git you! You git into a brush with 'em?"

Ben dropped off and seized Craigie's shoulders while Jase Huggins and others crowded close, firing questions, shouting "Hurrahs!"

"I saw rustlers driving off a herd of our cattle," Ben told Craigie while the others became quiet to listen. "I've found their trail out northeast and we gotta move fast to ketch 'em, because they know I saw 'em. Orkin and Kane, Marlin and Harry Pike are in the bunch. What's happened here? How did you folks know 'bout it?"

"Good God, Ben!" Craigie told him in renewed frenzy, "the little kid, Buster, run down on 'em at the falls after dinner—saw 'em hazin' the cows right into them falls. They shot the kid when he started to run for home—shot 'im right through the back. He saw Bill Marlin was the one closest to 'im in the shootin'. He outrun 'em, hangin' on his horse, but he's 'bout dead. We sent for the doctor and we was 'bout to start out when Beckett's and Krutch's men come—said rustlers hooked them for big bunches last night, and they want you to lead the chase."

"Has the doctor come?" Ben demanded, cold with fear. "Is the kid bad hurt?"

He began shoving men aside, starting toward the house as he asked the question and barely heard someone answer, someone who had come then from the direction of the house:

"The little feller just died, Ben—died 'fore the doc could get here."

CHAPTER XVII

AN HOUR after he had come to the Sugar Bowl on his jaded pony, Ben Boston was leading thirty men out upon the east mesa. Following his first cryptic command, when they had called to him for leadership, his words had been few. He rode in a white heat of rage, hating, craving revenge for the murder of a little boy. There was scarcely a thought left in him concerning the stolen cattle and the brazenly quick start of Barr Orkin to ruin him as he had ruined others in his scheme to possess the Sugar Bowl.

In Ben's memory clung the picture of Betty Lee, standing dry-eyed and ashen-faced over the dead body of her brother. She had seemed oblivious of his presence when he tried in his stumbling way to comfort her. He had turned away in his own futile grief for he had begun to love Buster Lee as if the little fellow had been his own brother. Against vehement protests from the lanky old cowboy, he directed Jase Huggins to stay with Silent Smith and help Betty. Now the surest way to ease Betty's irreparable grief was to smite the killers with everything he and his infuriated followers could carry.

Those followers, including Waldo Beckett and Tom Krutch, never questioned his course when he did not lead them north, but headed across in the night toward Ute Pass. He reasoned that the enemies whom they pursued, knowing that pursuit must come swiftly, would either have deserted the stolen cattle and scattered in flight, or would expect pursuit on the trail of his own herd and prepare an ambuscade. At the entrance to Ute Pass Ben stopped long enough to talk with Beckett and Krutch about his plan. He described the house and corral he had seen that day over north of the mountains and the lay of the land surrounding the place. His co-leaders answered his questions with the opinion that riders could scale the heights and surround that bowl, although this trail, too, might

be watched because the Beckett and Krutch cattle had undoubtedly been driven over it.

At one o'clock in the morning Ben led his entire force up out of the trail north of Ute Pass, turning eastward and then again into the north. They must avoid any trap on the trail ahead. The moon came up and lighted the torn, canyon-ribbed country.

Watt Craigie, riding up beside Ben, heard him say: "The little feller liked to ride in the light of the full moon. Just the other night he was asking me how soon would we have a full moon, and would I ride out in it with him."

"We'll git the devils that killed him, Ben," Craigie said. "That'll be something."

One of Beckett's men had a fair knowledge of the forbidding territory and acted as guide. A little before daylight the band came down a long, devious canyon and out into a stretch of open country.

"The trail to the Indian reservation runs through here," the guide explained. "Yonder, a little west, if I ain't mistook."

They found the trail over which herds had been driven. The guide said it was three or four miles back to the house Ben had discovered and that for a mile before the little bowl surrounding the house the trail went through a narrow cut. West of the cut the country was believed to be a fairly level plateau. Following on what the guide told him, Ben went on until they reached the narrow cut, then directed Beckett to take ten men and circle the plateau to come down, if possible, into the canyon immediately south of the house.

"Hadn't we better scout the place first, Boston?" Beckett, a cautious man, suggested. "They might've vamoosed by now, or be layin' for us."

BEN ARGUED with finality: "They likely won't figger we've worked this quick on their trail. If they're sticking with the herds they stole, they'll be pushing 'em out by daylight. They haven't tracked 'em along here yet. They was pushing my herd mighty hard when I saw 'em. I figure they'll rest the herd for a few hours in that bowl by the shack, then they'll heave 'em on north and keep their back trail covered with plenty guns. What I'm most worried over is that that skunk, Orkin, will slip away meaning to lie his way out of the hole he sees himself in. We gotta have that back trail covered to hold him. He's come this far to make sure the herds from your ranches get joined up with the steal from mine, but he'll be skipping quick."

Beckett took his men and began climbing to the plateau in the early morning light. Ben waited twenty minutes to give Beckett a lead, then guided the twenty other riders into the narrow gorge where it was still darkly shadowed. At the south end they heard men yelling their herd cries, rounding up cattle in the bowl. Ben and Tom Krutch left the others within the gorge and rode forward to the mouth. At their left the ground lifted around a group of monument columns of rock which bore caps like enormous toadstool tops. The two men rode up behind these silent sentinels of the small valley and looked out upon a scene which made their blood race faster.

The sun had risen high enough to flood the western half of the bowl with its bright rays. Two dozen riders were bunching cattle. Already some of the horsemen out there were squeezing in, shaping the nearest cattle into the vanguard of the drive. Krutch turned a pair of binoculars slowly here and there about the bowl. After a little of this silent observation, he handed the glasses to Ben and said:

"'Bout eight or nine hundred head. Some are mine and Waldo's, but most of 'em must be your young stock, Boston."

Ben adjusted the glasses to his vision. He didn't point the binoculars upon the herd and the busy cowpunchers. The cattle meant less to him now than catching Buster's murderers. By the naked eye he had already distinguished some figures of men at the cabin a half mile away.

He turned the glasses upon those figures. His horse moved a little, disrupting his vision. He dismounted and leaned against one of the toadstool monuments of rock. Krutch got down and came to his side. Ben looked steadily for a moment, then handed the glasses over to Krutch and said:

"Who is that on the porch with Orkin and Kane—the man with a long beard?"

Krutch gazed through the twin tubes only a few seconds.

"It's Jubal Hockaday," he said. "The dirty sheepherder has throwed in with the rustlers. That skunk, Bob Kane, pretendin' to hate the sheepmen so 'tarnally much, standin' right there with old whiskered Jubal like they was the best o' friends!"

"How long's Hockaday and Kane been in this country, Tom?" Ben asked, thoughtful.

"Hockaday bought out the Singin' River Ranch four years ago and begun runnin' in woollies right off. Some Cheyenne syndicate bought the 8-in-a-Diamond three years back and put Kane in charge."

"It totals up, all right," Ben said. "I never heard of Kane, but I remember the name of Hockaday as one of the leaders in the Wyoming rustler crowd that was busted up just over four years ago. I thought he was one of them that was killed in the cleanup, but I guess he got away here. The sheep are just his blind to hide his real business. He found a good partner in Gambler Orkin."

"LOOKY!" Tom Krutch cried, pointing toward the cabin. "Two fellers are ridin', hell fer 'lection, down from the canyon!"

Ben lifted the glasses from Krutch's hands and gazed through them. He watched the two riders dash around to the front of the cabin, obviously shouting something to Orkin and his two companions on the porch. They were waving arms and pointing back in the direction from which they had come. The three men on the cabin gallery jumped into action, running to saddled horses hitched at the yard fence. Ben handed the glasses back to Krutch.

"Come on!" he cried and swung into his saddle. "Beckett was spied coming down on 'em from behind. Let's hit them fellers pointing the herd out this way, but lose as little time on 'em as we can. I want murderers more'n rustlers now!"

"Marlin's out with the round-up bunch—I saw 'im in the saddle!" Krutch shouted, swinging his pony around after Ben's mount.

Ben wheeled about before his men in the mouth of the gorge, yelling orders, then spurred out onto the smooth ground of the bowl floor, twenty riders thundering at his horse's heels. Four of the rustler riders were pointing the herd into motion toward the gorge. They were little over two hundred yards away.

Some of Ben's followers unsheathed Winchesters. Horseshoe Manning, with a bellowed curse, lifted the 45.90 Ben had given him and leveled it from his shoulder as his pony streaked forward in a rippling, smooth run. A second after the powerful rifle barked its first shot the nearest of the point riders jerked over in his saddle, nearly fell from it, then hung on desperately as his horse turned about and started running. After three or four jumps by the frightened animal, the rider lost his hold and hit the ground, rolling over. He didn't move as the attacking band swept up toward him.

More rifles were talking now as Ben shouted deploy orders. He sent some of his men around the north and east sides of the gathering herd after the rustler riders in that direction and led the others in a wide circle the other way. He hoped to avoid the confusion of a stampede that would swamp the cabin, perhaps give a chance of escape to those he wanted. The lead cattle were already curling tails in the air, bellowing with fright and churning back upon the others behind them. Some of the herd riders had unlimbered rifles from their own saddle scabbards and bullets sung across the sunlight. One of Ben's closest fol-

lowers, a Krutch cowboy, yelled madly when his horse curled up, throwing him forward upon the ground.

Ben was firing his 45.90 as fast as he could lever in cartridges. He had fired his fourth shot before he saw one of his running targets drop from saddle. A bullet from an unseen rifle pinged off the cantle of his saddle. The herd of terrified cattle was stampeding back toward the far side of the bowl now. The rustler riders were dashing out from its path, followed by the uninterrupted hail of attackers' bullets. A horse plunged to the ground over to the left. Some men were running on foot in the direction of the distant house and corrals. They would run a short distance, halt, drop to a knee rest and fire, then run on again.

Tom Krutch was in close pursuit of a rider who streaked across Ben's roving vision. The pursued man turned in his saddle to fire a six-gun at Krutch. Ben recognized Harry Pike and lifted his rifle to fire, but his horse's legs suddenly ceased their springy race and curled under him. Ben found himself plunging through the air. He picked himself up from the ground and saw his mount kicking in death. He snapped around, lifting his Winchester, but Tom Krutch, at close range upon Harry Pike, fired in that second and Pike tumbled from his saddle. His hand was hooked in his bridle reins. The pony, with head pulled back, dragged him, then stopped to prance about his fallen master, still frightened. Krutch rode on after other human game.

BEN went toward Pike's horse, speaking to the animal as he approached. Pike still gripped the reins with a dying man's desperation. In his right hand, lying upon the ground beside him, he still held a six-gun. Ben came up to him with his rifle ready for a quick shot. Pike looked at him and a smile, twisted with pain, flickered across his features. His gun-gripping hand moved. Ben tautened, pointed the 45.90 with cocked hammer. Pike weakly shoved his gun away, dropped it and waved his hand an inch above the ground.

"'S all right, Boston," he said. "I'm through."

He coughed blood that drooled out and down over his throat. Ben stooped close to him while reaching for the bridle reins with one hand, loosening them from Pike's weakening left hand. Pallor of coming death was already on Pike's face.

"Why'd you do this to Betty Lee, Pike?" Ben asked.

Pike replied, wrenched with agony: "I'm goin' fast, Boston—ever'thing's gittin' hazy—I gotta tell you somethin'. I hated the Sugar Bowl out—hated the outfit after they done me dirt once. I worked for Orkin—went to Wyoming for him—come back. He wanted the Sugar Bowl. He planned it all along—brought Hockaday and Kane here. I liked Betty and the kid—wanted to quit, but Orkin said he'd kill me. Go git 'em, Boston—git the skunk, Marlin—he tried to kill Buster—woulda gone after the kid—killed 'im if I hadna put a gun on 'im. I done that, Boston—tell Betty and Buster I done that much for 'em— I'm through—Boston." His last breath of life had been used in that desperate effort to vindicate himself. He coughed a whispering, weak cough once and went perfectly still, a glazy look creeping into his eyes.

Ben pulled up close on the bridle reins and leaped into the saddle on Pike's horse. He knew Pike was dead. His anxious eyes swept the scene of two score riders running across the bowl, throwing lead at each other as they dug spurs into their racing mounts. The drift of battle was toward the house and corral. The herd was milling up on the lift of ground toward the east side, where the climb and the blocking walls of rock would deflect their maddened course and turn them around in a circle.

He spurred after the racing fighters. Some of the first of the rustler riders were already jumping from their horses at the house and running for that flimsy shelter. Watching these, Ben saw some others who had

evidently tried to run out the canyon trail and were retreating toward the house. Then he saw some horsemen pursuing them out of the canyon. Beckett's attackers had cut off retreat. Some of Beckett's men were already climbing the rocky heights above the house, firing down from that vantage point as Ben could see by the little puffs of gunpowder smoke.

There was a half-used haystack outside the east fence of the corral. Some of the first riders to arrive at the corral were piling off, leaping the fence and taking refuge behind the low stack of hay. Tom Krutch, evidently thinking Ben was out of the fight, led his attackers up in a circle back of the haystack. Ben saw two of the attackers drop from their saddles and gritted his teeth as he rode in. There was a constant rattle of gunfire now A bullet must have nicked his pony, for the animal leaped in a sudden spurt and tried to turn away. Ben's hat was jerked from his head and he felt the singeing burn of a bullet across the top of his head.

SOME of Krutch's followers dashed up to the corral fence and poured lead into the eight or ten men crouching behind the fence and haystack. Some of these crumpled, others ran toward the house; one staggered and fell on the way. Two of the over-bold attackers clutched saddle horns, swaying. Ben raced in past them, shouting orders to get behind the haystack. Horses with empty saddles were trotting away, here and there. Roar of six-guns, the keener tune of Winchesters, the shouts of fighters and screams of wounded and dying men filled the air with turmoil and confusion. A bullet smashed Ben's Winchester against his side, nicking his flesh between forefinger and thumb, suddenly numbing his right hand. But the rifle had saved his life, for the bullet would have caught him dead center.

He threw himself from the saddle and fell in behind the hay pile where his friends, some still mounted, some on foot, were crowding in. He had dropped his rifle, but jumped back to pick it up from the ground. Several bullets knocked splinters from the fence over his head, singing loudly. With the 45.90 in hand, he fell backwards and rolled to safety. His quick glances at the house had disclosed to him that it was a pole structure with mud-chinked spaces between the poles.

"Pour your bullets between the poles, men!" he shouted to those who were already sniping around the edges of the haystack. "Fire one shot low, another waist-high, and the third one high up for any that might climb the rafters inside."

All of the surviving rustlers had entered the small, twenty-foot-square house by now. They were firing from an end window and from holes in the mud chinking. Beckett and his men kept up a constant peppering of the house from the other side and from the rocks above.

Ben crawled to the other side of the haystack and studied the upper side of the house. The house itself was covered with riven boards that were curled and dried with age. He thought of taking hay to the heights above the house, tying it around rocks and throwing it afire down upon that tinder-box roof. The missiles might roll off before setting fire to the boards. He gave up the idea and began shoving fresh cartridges into his rifle magazine.

"Keep pouring it into 'em, men!" he ordered and commenced methodical emptying of his rifle into the house, lying flat on the ground at the lower edge of the haystack. A bullet plowed the ground before his face, throwing dirt into his eyes. He fell back, rubbing the dirt from his eyes and heard Tom Krutch shout:

"They're hollerin' and groanin' a plenty inside! They cain't stand this much longer! Beckett's givin' 'em hell from t'other side!"

A minute passed. Ben had cleared his eyes and lay down at the haystack edge to put some more bullets into the house. He saw only a few ragged patches of mud chinking left in the cracks. Then there were sudden yells all around the haystack

calling attention to one man who dashed out of the front door and went bounding for the open gate of the yard fence. Ben fired at the running figure, but missed. Another man leaped out, quickly followed by others until seven men were going after the first one, literally running for their lives. Two of them dropped under the avalanche of bullets Ben's companions fired. Ben had recognized Barr Orkin and Bill Marlin among the runners. His glance shot on ahead of them, out into the open ground where he saw the objective of the escaping men.

"On your broncs, men!" he shouted. "They're headed for them saddled horses loose out there! Don't let 'em get to leather!"

He ran to the men who had been holding all the horses in a group and leaped into a saddle that had a rope tied to its side. He was filled with one burning thought: To catch Bill Marlin alive. A bullet death was too lenient for the killer of Buster Lee.

Marlin ran up to a pony with dragging reins. The scared animal swerved around, trying to escape the big gunman. Marlin ducked in behind the pony, around the other way. He made a wild leap and caught the reins just below the bits. Some of the other escaping men were running on after other horses that trotted away from them with uplifted heads and dragging reins. Ben gave them only one glance and glued his attention to Marlin. He snatched up the coiled rope and played it out for a cast as he pointed his mount. Marlin was climbing into the saddle with wild haste.

THE loop shot out from Ben's swinging hand and dropped over Marlin's shoulders just as the big fellow stabbed his spurs against his captured horse's flanks. Ben jerked hard on the rope and set back on his pony's reins. Marlin dragged out of the saddle and hit the ground heavily on his back. Ben took a quick hitch of the rope around saddle horn and started dragging his victim back toward the corral, fifty yards away, glancing about at the work of his friends as he went.

He saw Barr Orkin and Bob Kane standing with hands uplifted, surrounded by horsemen. Three men lay still on the ground not far away. Kane was wobbly on his feet and a wide splotch of blood reddened his shirt front. Orkin had a bullet gash across his cheek, but stood firmly enough, glaring across at Tom Krutch, one of his captors.

"Bring 'em to the corral!" Ben ordered and dragged Marlin onward.

"Look out, Ben!" Watt Craigie, one of Orkin's captors, shouted, pointing a gun toward Marlin. "That devil's tryin' to git his gun!"

Ben glanced backward, saw Marlin struggling to lift his gun from holster as he kicked along through the dirt at the end of the rope. He stuck spurs suddenly to his pony's flanks and shouted to Craigie not to shoot. The pony grunted and leaped forward, lifting Marlin clear of the ground for a space of six feet. The half-drawn gun dropped to the ground and Marlin set up a loud barrage of curses, interspersed with howls as he bumped over rough places. When Ben stopped at the corral fence, the badly bedraggled killer of Buster Lee was seized by several waiting men.

Beckett and some of his men came from the house. The rancher looked pale, but showed no signs of being wounded. Ben Boston asked:

"What's the matter, Mr. Beckett? Did they nick you?"

"No, Boston. Only two o' my crowd got hit and not very bad at that. I just seen the most sickenin' sight I ever want to see—inside that shack. Fourteen dead 'uns in there, piled every whichaway. Not a live groan left in the whole bunch after old Hockaday kilt hisself. Old Jubal's eyes was cut right out by a slantin' big bullet. He lay there a groanin' and moanin' when we walked in and when I spoke to him, a-tellin' him to put down his gun, he ups and turns the .45 on the side o' his hairy head and blowed his own brains out."

"I know it's bad, Mr. Beckett," Ben

said, "but it's a price we have to pay in bringing law and peace to this country. You don't think me, or any of the others enjoy it, do you?"

"Hey, Ben," Watt Craigie called from where the two captives were being brought in, "this feller Kane is caved in."

Bob Kane died a few minutes later. Barr Orkin stood near, hands tied behind him, face bleeding slightly from a slanting surface wound. His pale eyes ground into Ben Boston's face with silent hatred. Ben ordered him roped to the corral fence beside Marlin.

"You've made a mistake you'll pay for plenty, Boston," Orkin said, speaking for the first time since his capture. "You've killed Bob Kane along with these rustlers that I don't blame you for killing. But Bob and I come looking for a horse thief like I told you yesterday. The rustlers caught us and knew we'd get men on their trail if they let us go. We were held here by them. You come shooting, never giving us a chance to escape, and killed Kane. You'll have to answer to the law for that."

Ben stood coolly watching Orkin's pale face until he had finished. He didn't answer the Oh-Kay man, but turned and gave orders to some of the idle men to ride out across the bowl and make an accounting of any men that might be wounded or dead out there. He then called Waldo Beckett and Tom Krutch, the only rancher members of the Escolante Association that were present.

THE three of them went behind the haystack and Ben told the two men what dying Harry Pike had said with his last breath, reiterated how he had caught Orkin and Kane trailing him just ahead of his stolen cattle the day before. They reviewed briefly other unquestionable proofs that Orkin was a guilty leader of the rustler band, the most damning one of the proofs being that Bill Marlin and several of the known dead men were Orkin employees. Ben called special attention to one of those skilled in the final rush from the cabin whom he recognized as the cowboy who had called him to the stable ambush in Escolante the night of Lucy's party.

"What's the verdict, gents?" he asked his companions.

"We got law in Escolante," Tom Krutch said with a hard look on his face, "but why give the slick coyote a chance to lie out o' what we know is piled agin 'im. I got a new rope on my saddle."

Waldo Beckett was a softer man than Krutch and hesitated. Ben settled the argument, saying: "We'll leave it to our men. Some of their partners won't be riding with 'em no more."

Two of Ben's riders, Mike Noonan and one of the extras who had come in with the old Boston bunch, were dead and six others were wounded. Two of them, including reckless Horseshoe Manning, suffered from serious body wounds. Three of Krutch's men had been killed and two others would have to await wagon transport to the home ranch beyond Ute Pass. Not a rustler remained alive, excepting Marlin and his employer, unless some had escaped in the confusion.

By late morning their own wounded and dead had been gathered at the corral and the suffering ones attended to as well as possible. Ben then called all the men around him near the wounded. These were stretched on saddle blankets in the partial shade of the corral fence. He repeated what he had told Krutch and Beckett, speaking to his men within hearing of Orkin and Marlin who had stood or sagged on their bonds for hours beside the fence.

Already many of the men had been asking in no unmistakable terms why the two prisoners were left unhung. Only the quiet, grim face of Ben Boston had held them in leash. Now their verdict was noisy and unanimous. Bill Marlin heard the verdict and cursed those who condemned him to immediate death. Barr Orkin, apparently convinced at last that his smooth tongue could no longer save him, said nothing as he stood sweating in the sun. He had asked twice for water during the morning and

Ben had given him drinks from his own canteen.

They pulled off one of the strongest of the corral poles, laid it across the inside corner of the high fence, fixed two ropes with hangman's knots and fastened them to the cross pole. The prisoners were lifted to the bare backs of horses and led around into the corral corner. Tom Krutch adjusted the knots while Bill Marlin cursed him, cursed silent Barr Orkin and spat his hatred at the crowd. Ben Boston gave the order for the horses to be led out from under the doomed pair, then he turned away to look for Harry Pike's horse.

A few minutes later some riders were speeding homeward for wagons with which to transport the wounded and dead friends and for shovels with which to bury the dead rustlers. Waldo Beckett went by the Ute Pass trail, a sick man. Ben took Watt Craigie and three of his men and rode up the southwest trail, heading for home. He believed his fighting with men was finished and the Sugar Bowl made safe for all time, but he had another and harder kind of battle to face at the end of his ride.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE LONG ride homeward with his three companions, Ben spoke very seldom. The thunderbolt of tragedy which had struck the Sugar Bowl in Buster Lee's death raised up a wall before him just when he had thought the way ahead seemed to be smoothing out.

He tried to think as he rode along, tried to think of the way ahead, but he was achingly tired and sleepy. He had slept less than an hour since Friday night and now it was Monday afternoon. At times he nodded in his saddle and in that half-way world betwen sleep and wakefulness he would see Betty Lee standing over the body of her dead brother. The tormenting vision persisted until he conquered the deadening sleepiness. Thereafter he rode wide awake, only to think of nothing else but Betty and of what they would do now at the Sugar Bowl.

The sun was setting as they rode past the Cliff Dweller ruins. It was already night when they reached home.

Only Silent Smith was at the Sugar Bowl bunkhouse. The main house was dark as the death that had so recently trodden over it. Smith whispered that friends of Betty's had come out from town to help her, that those friends had accompanied her and Mrs. Mester with Buster's body, which was taken in to Newton's Undertaking Parlor. Jase Huggins had driven the wagon with the body and would come back with the wagon that night.

Ben and his men ate the supper which the whispering cook quickly prepared. In spite of the long, arduous hours since he had last eaten, Ben could eat but little. He left the bunkhouse dining room and went into the big, dark, empty house. He walked aimlessly through the rooms, upstairs and down, put his hands on the soft black velvet dress Betty Lee had bought and worn just last Saturday. Wonderingly he looked for the rest of her clothing when he realized that only the velvet dress and the pink slippers were in her room.

He went down and stood on the spot by the sofa where he had held Betty in his arms and kissed her. The silence and emptiness of the house oppressed him like something visible and coldly malignant. He found himself wanting Betty's strangely hesitant smile and the sorrowing depths of her dark eyes to comfort him; he wanted to hear the glad cry and chattering talk of little Buster telling of his day's adventures in school or on horseback.

Watt Craigie slipped into the room and said: "Don't take it so hard thataway, Ben. I know somethin' 'bout how you feel. I sorta got to likin' the little button a lot, myself."

There was a husky break in Craigie's voice. When Ben turned his eyes slowly upon the cowboy he saw dark patches under the redhead's eyes and a lack of the glint

that was usually in the laughing blue eyes.

"You've been through quite a pull without sleep, Watt," he said very quietly. "Go snatch some shut-eye till Jase gets back, then you boys pull out on the mean job you gotta do. I can't sleep here—can't fool around here, knowing what Betty's going through in town. I'm saddling up and heading in to see her. I'll stay for the funeral, then be back to help you. Guess we'll find a place to bury Mike and the other feller here somewhere close by."

Craigie had his own ideas about Ben's need of rest, knowing that his chief had been in the saddle much longer than he had been, but he had long since learned not to question the man's commands. He went to the corral, where Skillet had been resting since Saturday night, and had the dark racer saddled for Ben when the latter finally came out.

BEN ARRIVED in town at midnight and was told by the hotel clerk that Betty Lee was staying with the Blynns and that the burying would take place at eleven o'clock the next morning. Ben engaged a room and went to bed, leaving orders to be called at seven o'clock.

The first thing he did on arising was to hunt up one of Escolante's three doctors and make sure that the medical man would be on hand at the Sugar Bowl house for the arrival of the wounded men. Then he hunted up Sheriff Lemming, finding the old bachelor law officer eating his breakfast in a restaurant. He sat down at the sheriff's table and began immediately what he had to say, without any preliminaries.

"Sorry you had to miss out on the clean-up, sheriff," he said. "We had short notice and had to make a quick run. There won't be any more rustling in these parts for a long spell."

The sheriff made a vigorous "Humph!", smoothed his long moustache with nervous fingers, looking at Ben just once in a quick glance before turning attention back to his eating. He held a forkful of ham and eggs half way to his mouth and said:

"When I heard what happened to the little Lee boy, I went out and found you'd skipped on the trail with plenty men. I come back to get my deputies and round up a posse. Then I got to figgerin', Boston. I figgered I'd be way yonder late to the picnic, anyhow, and I figgered again that maybe a John Law might sorta be in the way with fellers like Ben Boston, Tom Krutch and Waldo Beckett on the job. I done what I never done before since I been lawin' here. I set myself down and waited. Well, did you leave any skunks for the law to worry about?"

"Not a one, Sheriff. Maybe a few small fry that stayed at the Oh-Kay, 8-in-a-Diamond, or in the other hangouts, but they'll be skipping, now that we busted their leaders and gun partners. Mr. Beckett and some of the rest of us got sorta gumpy in the stummicks before the mess was over, but—it's all over. You seen Betty since she come to town?"

"I stayed at the Blynns last night till they made her turn in. She's the hard sort in this kinda thing. Mighty shut-mouth and no cry. She'll miss the boy."

"I'll eat a snack and run down to see her before the burying," Ben said and ordered his breakfast only because he knew that he had to have food in spite of his absent appetite.

The funeral was held over the grave in Escolante's Gentile burying ground at eleven o'clock. The minister of the church to which the Lees had belonged officiated. Ben stood beside Betty Lee. She clung to his arm with tense, gripping hands. Only the tightly drawn, colorless lips revealed her suffering. Lucy Bollinger stood near with her mother and father. Lucy lifted a handkerchief to her eyes and kept it there while the minister dropped a handful of dirt into the grave and intoned a prayer. Ben's eyes were wet, tears rolled down his tanned cheeks and his throat was painfully dry. Miss Rutley, Buster's teacher, stood at the other side of the grave, crying softly.

Ben went back to the Blynn home

with Betty. She spoke only once on the way, saying, "It will be so lonely for me now."

"I'll try to make up a little for your loss, Betty," Ben told her. "I know I can't do much, but let me try, little sister."

HE KNEW from the way she flinched that he should not have said that. In a fog of uncertainty over having to leave her in the care of Mrs. Mester and the Blynns, he rode away to the ranch. He had told Betty of the fight and of having to care for the dead and wounded cowboys. She did not change expression when he told her briefly that Bill Marlin and Barr Orkin had been killed. He promised to come back for her as soon as his duties at the Sugar Bowl permitted.

His work at the ranch took more time than he had anticipated. It was late Tuesday night when the lumbering, slow freighter wagon with its four-horse team brought the dead and wounded into the barn yard. Coffins had to be made and graves dug before the two dead were buried Wednesday. Horseshoe Manning's chest wound gave Dr. Barton some worry.

At one-thirty, Ben dismounted and hitched Skillet to the post in front of the Blynn home in Escolante. As he rushed in toward the front door, Lucy Bollinger came out upon the porch to greet him. There was a strange expression on her face.

"Is she feeling better?" he asked. "Is Betty all right?"

"She's gone, Ben," Lucy told him, watching his face. "I guess she couldn't—"

"Gone!" Ben cried, standing rigidly, staring at Lucy. "Gone where?"

"I don't know. Don't bark at me, Ben. I had nothing to do with it. She left a note for you with Mrs. Blynn. Here it is."

She extended an envelope to him. He seized it and tore the sealed flap with a quick thrust of forefinger, snatched folded sheets out and began to read:

"Dear Ben Boston:

"You have been such a good big brother, kind and capable and generous. It was hard to make this decision to go away without seeing you again and thanking you in person, but I know what a sweetly pitying heart you have. It is better that I should not be around for your pity to mar your good judgment.

"I have withdrawn my private funds from the bank They will be sufficient for my needs during the next year or two. When the ranch is again paying a profit I will let you send me my little share if you will promise not to take out more than is good for proper development of the place. I will write to you a few months later to let you know where I am.

"With all my heart I wish you and Miss Bollinger unmarred happiness to the end of your days, and may those days be many.

"Your 'Little Sister,'
"Betty."

Ben stuffed the letter into a pocket with shaking hand. He stared at Lucy, anger and the turmoil of a great anxiety distorting his face. "Where—when did she go? Has she left Escolante?"

"Ben, why get into such a bother?" Lucy replied. "She wanted to get away from where she has had so much trouble. Don't you see she has acted sensibly and taken a great difficulty out of your way?"

"There's only one stage a day out of here to Purvis," Ben said, his face gone white with anger at Lucy. "Did she leave this morning, or—"

He whirled and looked at four people coming in at the gate. They were Mrs. Blynn, her two daughters and Mrs. Mester. The latter's reddened eyes showed she had been crying. Ben ran down the steps and faced the women.

"When did Betty leave?" he demanded. "How did she go?"

"Oh, Mr. Boston," Mrs. Mester half moaned, "I tried to make her stay and she just wouldn't—"

Ben seized the woman's arms and cried: "For God's sake answer me! When and where did Betty go? I'm

going after her! Tell me!" He shook Mrs. Mester's arms.

Marcia Blynn came close and said: "She just left for Purvis on the stage. It drove away from the hotel about five minutes ago."

In three long steps Ben reached the hitching post and snatched the reins loose. Before he settled into the saddle Skillet was running. Mrs Blynn looked until horse and rider had gone in a cloud of dust around the next street corner, then went on to the steps as she declared:

"There goes a man crazy in love. Who would have thought it?"

Lucy Bollinger heard the wiser, older woman's remark and turned back into the house, biting her lips. Already her impulsive mind was made up. Tonight when Emmet Vargas came she would give him the answer he had been pleading for.

BEN BOSTON knew that the Purvis stage road skirted the western flank of the mesa peninsula which lay west of the Sugar Bowl. The stage wheel tracks leading away in the dust from the hotel front were easily followed.

With five minutes' lead the stage would be nearly a mile ahead of him. By a fast, steady lope, Skillet should overtake the trotting stage team of six horses within fifteen or twenty minutes. At a gallop the last houses of the town were left behind. The high ground of the divide between the two streams which met below Escolante now lay out ahead about a half mile. The stage had gone from view over that high ground.

At the highest part of the long, low divide a full view of the country beyond lay before Ben's searching eyes. The thin hair-line of the road was marked distinctly through the green grasslands to where it crossed the tree-bordered stream nearly two miles away. Down there, less than half the distance to the river crossing, he saw the dust cloud raised by the stage. The stage and lead horses moved beyond that dust like wavering ghosts.

"Come on, Skillet, old boy!" he shouted to his horse. "Go get that stage. Knock the road out from under, boy!"

He leaned in saddle and Skillet streaked out into a run on the gentle downward slope. Grass and waving prairie flowers went by in a blur; a jackrabbit loped out and raced down the road ahead. Skillet gained on the long-eared racer. After a two-hundred-yard run, the rabbit gave up the contest and darted out across country. He stopped thirty yards away and sat up on his hockers, ears straight, watching the curious halocaust that left dust floating toward him.

While Skillet raced along a quarter of a mile from the river ford, the stage team splashed down into the middle of the stream and halted. Ben saw the harnessed animals lowering their heads, dabbing their nozzles into the water. He swept onward, cutting the distance down to three hundred, then two hundred yards. The stage driver, sitting on the high seat in front, lifted his whip to pop it over his horses. Ben yelled and jerked his gun. He fired a shot into the air and yelled again.

The driver drew himself around and looked at Ben, then bent down and came up lifting a Winchester. By that time Ben was within a hundred yards. He could see some of the passengers looking out of stage windows. He reholstered his gun and lifted his empty hand to show the driver.

"Wait a minute!" he shouted. "I'm no holdupper!"

The driver, still unconvinced, held his Winchester to his shoulder and called out when Ben sent Skillet splashing into the stream.

"Stop where you are, feller!" he commanded. "What you up to?"

The door of the stage on the side Ben was approaching flew open. Betty Lee stood there gazing at him with wondering eyes. She cried to the driver: "It's all right, Mr. Fry. That's Ben Boston."

Ben reined Skillet close to the stage door and lifted Betty into his arms. He held her in a close bundle while he kissed her.

(Continued On Page 94)

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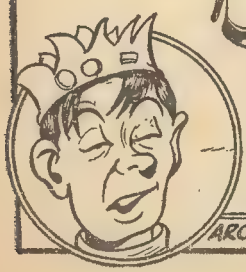

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(Continued From Page 92)

"Why did you try to run away from me, Betty?" he asked.

"But, Ben," she cried low, catching her voice. "What about you and Miss Bollinger? I thought—"

"Yes, you thought we was gonna be married and that— Aw, shucks, Betty, I love you. Lucy and I have been quarreling ever since our kid days together, not really engaged—only trying to make up our minds, and you come in and settled it for me."

"Hey," the stage driver shouted, "when you gonna stop that foolishness and let me git on? You're holdin' up Gov'ment mail, feller, 'sides a passle o' travelers!"

Ben nudged Skillet and started on to the bank.

"Betty, please say you'll marry me right away," he begged.

"Hey, you!" the stage driver shouted. "Come back here with my passenger!"

"Go on without her, you long-eared mule-skinner!" Ben shouted over his shoulder. "She's not going with you this trip."

"Jee-godfrey!" the driver roared. "What am I to do with her baggage?"

Betty's eyes shone upon Ben with a happier light than he had yet seen in them. He watched her face anxiously as he pleaded: "Say you'll marry me, please, Betty, darling."

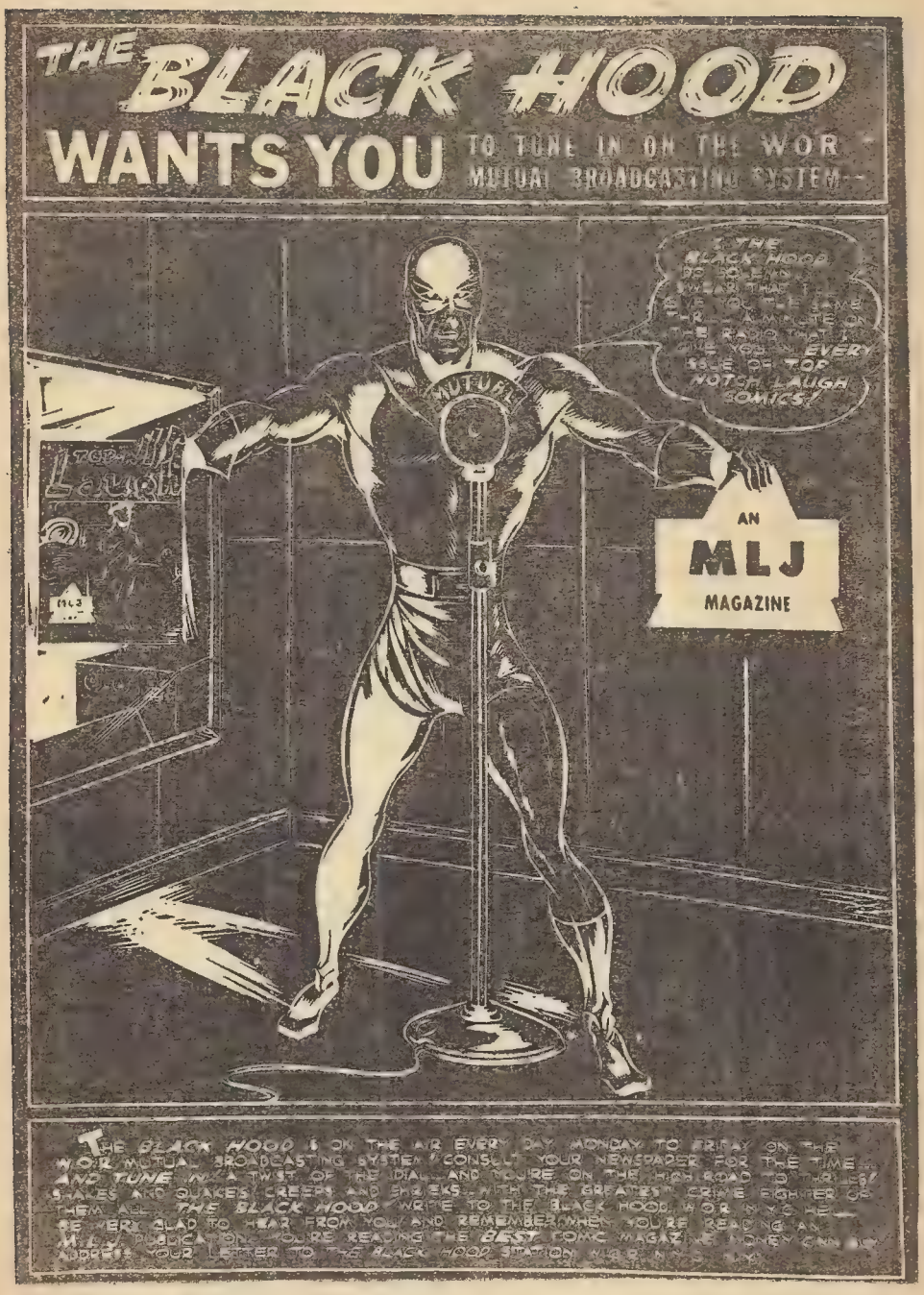
"If you're very sure, Ben," she started to say, then could not continue. For the first time since he had known her she burst into uncontrollable tears, burying his face into the crook of his neck and shoulder while her arms clung tightly to him.

"Hey, durn your hide, feller!" the driver shouted, growing hoarse. "What am I gonna do with Miss Lee's baggage?"

Ben lifted his head and yelled: "Bring it back to the hotel in 'Scolante tomorrow! On your way, oldtimer!"

He nudged Skillet with the spurs and they started homeward across the prairie.

THE END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THE TRAIL TRAP

★ By T. W. FORD ★

(Author of "Trail of the Black Spider," "Guns of the Unhung," etc.)

Little Joe Bodie had to catch the murderer of Solitaire Tice alone, for Marshal Ellord was out of town. And no one figured Little Joe was worth co-operating with!

TWO shots rattled out on the sharp frosty night so fast it sounded as if a man were fanning the hammer. After a brief pause, there was another, a single one, and a man's pain-torn curse floating after it. The sounds came from down beyond the bridge at the bottom of the hill from Lusker. The boot heels of a staggering man thudded on the bridge itself. Then there were two more gun reports, the second muffled as if by distance. The quiet of the night flowed back over the wounds the explosions had made in it.

The last echo died out, and the wind chased a piece of brown paper down the hill.

The door of the jailhouse slammed behind Little Joe Bodie. He was tucking his nightshirt inside his batwing chaps as he ran, toting a gunbelt with two filled holsters in his free hand. The moon that had been playing hide-and-go-seek with the drifting cloud racks all night poked through and showed his coal-black hair and slim bony body. He called something back to the jailor as he turned into the alkali-coated road. Then, sombrero bouncing on his shoulders as it hung by the chin strap, he legged it down the hill toward the bridge.

Doors were jerked open and voices called along the road. A couple of figures, shadowy as the moon was blanketed again, swung in behind Little Joe. He pulled up short as he got to the near end of the bridge over Burnt Wagon Creek, listening. From down the trail came the faint beat of horsehoofs, blurred by the wind. They were moving southward. Little Joe saw the figure sprawled at

the other end of the plank bridge, upper part of the body hidden in the undergrowth on the creek bank.

Little Joe Bodie, deputy marshal of Lusker, called out to the fallen man once, then advanced when he got no answer. He got to the gleaming black boots and saw the bloodstains on the road. They started about ten feet beyond the end of the bridge and ran back toward it after wavering boot tracks. Little Joe read the signs: a badly wounded man stumbling backward. Then he turned and parted the bushes over the rest of the body. The icy-hued moon slid into view again and showed the white ruffled shirt of the body on its back in the bushes.

Even before he bent to see the face over which the black flat-topped sombrero had slid, Little Joe knew then. It was Solitaire Tice, boss of the gambling hell, The Lucky Deuce. Solitaire lay very still, eyes staring straight up blankly. A wisp of smoke still curled up from the .45 gripped in his hand. Even as the deputy looked, the wind poked open his black frock coat and revealed the wet blood on his white shirt. It looked like a slow mushrooming ruby.

Going to a knee, Little Joe bent over the shot man. He was just in time to catch his final gasp. Froth bubbled around his torn-back mouth, and the crimson spread no further on his shirt front; he was dead.

The story was plain. Solitaire had closed up his gambling joint and had been en route home to the little place he had across the creek. Somebody had waylaid and gunned him. Acting on a hunch, Little Joe pulled gently at the body and rolled it onto its side a moment. He was right. There was a bullet hole, red-ringed, in the back of the coat over the left shoulder. Solitaire had been nailed from behind before he died.

The pair who had followed him down the hill from town came up. One was a gray-bearded man pulling his coat over big bare shoulders as he stopped. He was Ab Murdock who ran the General Store.

"Somebody got Solitaire," Joe Bodie said.

Murdock swore softly and bent over the body. A deeply religious man who always read a passage from the Bible when some poor devil was put to rest on Lusker's Boot Hill, he pulled off his hat when he stood up. "Solitaire was a good man. Gawd have mercy on his soul. . . And the dirty sidewinder who gave it to him pumped in the finishing shot point-blank. They's powder burns on his shirt front."

LITTLE JOE nodded; he had seen them. He was already moving carefully up the edge of the road, looking for tracks. There were some bootprints from behind a big dead pine trunk that stood at the trail side. But in the soft wet dirt they were squashy and shapeless, telling little.

"Did he say anything afore he died, Bodie?" the man with Murdock called.

Little Joe gave no answer as he moved around a bend in the trail leading away from the town. When he returned some minutes later, a small bunch of speepy-eyed half-dressed folks had gathered. From a house up on the top of the hill a baby squalled. All the talking stopped abruptly and the eyes shifted to Joe. The same question was in every one. Hank Ellard, big, wire-tough law marshal of the town, was away on the trail of a horsethief. He, Little Joe Bodie, was the Law itself here now.

"Well, what're you aiming to do, Joe?" one man called harshly. Joe Bodie didn't need to be told he was one of those who had voted against him at the last election. The Haig brothers who ran the ramshackle hotel stepped forward. One said, "We all knew Solitaire Tice and respected him. We demand something be done. If the Law cain't handle it itself—"

Another man thrust a bony finger at Little Joe who nervously toed the wet earth. It had rained earlier that night. "Well, Bodie, do you wear that purty badge for anything?" It was plain they had little confidence

in him. He himself wished like blazes Ellard was on hand.

"Found some fresh hoofmarks up around the bend where a pony was left waiting outa sight," Little Joe said quietly. They pushed around him, jabbering and wanting to know if he was waiting for the killer to walk smack into his jail and give himself up. Joe Bodie gestured mildly up the hill. "Waiting for my pony that's coming now," he said. The jailor was leading the bay mare down the road as Little Joe had called to him to do when he ran out of the jailhouse.

Murdock came running out the alley from beside the General Store with a saddled-up horse. He yelled he was coming along. An old man in the party at the bridge grabbed Little Joe's bridle reins as the latter swung into the hull.

"Better wait till a few more of the boys join you, Bodie," the man said. "This might turn out to be a man's job. . ."

They pushed harder through the night as the moon got clear of the dissipating clouds to remain out, Little Joe Bodie and the five-man posse at his back. Joe Bodie knew he himself was on trial. There had been a heap of opposition to his candidacy as deputy marshal, and plenty of angry astonishment when he was elected. More than one citizen of Lusker had been waiting for the first test of the retiring dry-voiced undersized deputy. That test had come.

They came to the fork where the smaller division of the trail branched westward toward the flat-topped line of hills. The fresh hoofprints were even clearer in the mud of the little-used fork. Little Joe loosened his Colts in the scabbards nervously. One of the men said if they gave the killer a catching there was no need to take him any further than the handiest cottonwood limb. The words sent a cold shock down the deputy's spine.

The track wound through the domelike hills with their sparse fringe of second-growth pine. They began to climb as the newly bared stars waned overhead. A rifle bullet droned past Little Joe's sombrero up in the front of the column. And the spang-g of a Winchester's bark followed it. There was another crash on the graying night and bullet lead went screeching off a boulder inches from Ab Murdock's stirrup. The six hastily scrambled from saddles and sought cover.

"It come from that little rock ledge up there by the lightning-split pine," one of the men called.

DOWN behind a clump of brush, Little Joe Bodie steadied the rifle he had pulled from the saddle boot as he jumped clear. Then he propped his hat on a piece of dried stick and pushed it out into sight. He wasn't kept waiting. There was the zing of a slug and a hole gaped into the crown of his Stetson. Little Joe's rifle answered the shot, blasting twice at where he had caught the muzzle froth up above. One of his bullets sent powdered stone spraying in a cloud from the outcropping ledge.

Murdock lunged out into the open to make a try for the rifle in his saddle. The Winchester up above spoke its piece and Murdock came diving back, a clean-drilled hole in his sombrero, too. Little Joe crept back and they had a war council in the brush.

"Let's drive right plumb in and smoke him outa there," one of them suggested.

But Little Joe shook his head determinedly. He wasn't afraid for himself though it would take more than one man to do it. He was thinking of them. Murdock with three motherless children to raise, and the sharp-chinned Burns with a sick wife. And Charley Chassen who was so short-sighted he could see clearly only ten feet. This was no regular experienced posse.

"We'll flank him on both sides," Little Joe decided. "We'll work around the ends of that ledge and corner him." Leaving one man to keep a front fire on the fugitive, the deputy took Murdock with him and sent the other three to work around from the north side.

It took them about half an hour to

wriggle through brush and over the rough ground to get to either end of the ledge. The moon was nothing but a pale globe in the sky when the two parties met coming in at either end of the ledge. The other bunch almost opened fire on Little Joe and Murdock by mistake in the mist that was beginning to seep from the ground. The hunted hombre had pulled stakes. There were just a few Winchester shells at the spot where he had been crouched.

Murdock swore hoarsely as Little Joe called down to Burns to bring up their ponies. Once again Little Joe wished the marshal himself, Hank Ellard, was along. If Ellard had decided against a frontal rush as he had, there would have been no questioning it. But now that he had and the wanted hombre had gotten away—Joe Bodie had thought of Ellard when the riflemen behind the ledge had centered first his hat and then Murdock's with bullets. Hank Ellard was a deadly marksman like that, too.

They picked up the trail again and came to level ground. It was a nasty piece of badlands, mostly rock and long tongues of lava outcroppings with little twisting cuts and canyons. The rest of the posse were plainly discouraged as they followed the hoof scratches on the rocks into one of the canyons. Around a bend in it they came upon a shot horse. Aside from the bullets through its head to put it out of its misery, the animal had a wounded leg.

The scratch tracks led on down the canyon. Apparently the fugitive had had a second cayuse hidden here in case of trouble. Little Joe straightened, grim-faced, after having checked the brand mark on the dead animal. Beside him Ab Murdock whistled softly; it was a Loop-Y pony. The Loop-Y belonged to the proud King Riner up east of Lusker.

They followed the trail sign on until they came to the western boundary of the badlands whence the yellow desert stretched away. Daylight had come, the sun poking over the horizon. The sand was almost

(Continued On Page 100)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 99)

dry and the rising wind blurred the hoofprints leading out across it. Within a couple of hours more, they had to admit they were whipped and turn back. The sultry wind combined with the torch of a sun in the coppery sky had obliterated all sign.

"We'd uh got the varmind almost sure had we rushed him when he holed up behind that ledge," Murdock said dourly.

IT WAS afternoon before they rode back into Lusker, weary and trail-stained and empty-handed. The jailor told little Joe that Blackie Sebore had come to the jail early that day to see him. Sebore owned the big Umbrella spread to the south of the town. Even as the deputy walked up the jail steps, Sebore came out of a barroom down the line and came along the walk, two of his tough outfit flanking him. Sebore was a stocky arrogant hombre, always slightly beard-stubbled. He was a big figure in that piece of country.

"Howdy, marshal! Well—you're acting marshal anyways," he said as he came up to the steps. "Fella came up past my place about dawn and brought word how Solitaire Tice was shot. So I come in pronto, Bodie."

Little Joe nodded, fearing what was to come next.

It didn't; Sebore looked pontifical. "No sense of mincing matters. Folks know that me and Solitaire had a row not long back. We carried a grudge, so I had a motive, maybe. Under suspicion. All right, I'm putting my cards on the table. These two boys of my spread can swear I was at the ranch all night." The two slab-bodied hairpins with him nodded like puppets.

"You'll always know where to find me, Bodie. What I say is—let justice be done. Act like you're under no obligations to me!" He strode off with his men.

Inside the jail, Little Joe Bodie drank three cups of hot java and toyed with the grub the jailor had brought in. He admitted to himself he was scared. Sebore had a motive all right. He had lost considerable

dinero in the late Solitaire's place at stud and ended up with a near-shooting row in which he claimed he had been cheated.

And King Riner, one of whose ponies had been found dead up there in the badlands, had a motive, too. Some years back his younger sister had run off with Solitaire Tice and married him. When they returned to town, the haughty Riner refused to speak to her. Less than six months ago she had died in childbirth. The rumor was that Solitaire was drunk in a card game and didn't send for a doctor until too late. Riner had a reason to hate the dead man all right.

Little Joe's thoughts returned to Blackie Sebore. In that last election, it was the sudden swing of Sebore and his outfit to him that had put him in office over Luke Shore, the former deputy. Since back in the early days of Lusker when it came out that a marshal and his appointed deputy had worked in cahoots in a series of stage-line holdups, the rule in the town had been to elect the deputy as well. Shore had been an experienced veteran at the job. The one charge against him was wounding the wrong man so he was crippled for life by mistake once. Little Joe on the other hand, though a dead shot, had a rep for thinking twice before he slung hoglegs. On the other hand there were some who hinted he was a little lily-livered and apt to sidestep trouble. But Sebore's surprise support had gotten him the job.

He heard mumblings of the old short-on-nerve charges as he moved through the town that afternoon. He caught cold-eyed looks from all sides. Murdock stomped into the air at the Lucky Deuce and bluntly demanded to know why he was not hunting down King Riner.

"Something's going to be done damn pronto or some of us will be taking the Law into our own hands," a saloon tough snorted.

"I'm wearing the badge," Little Joe told them drily. "Don't forget that. And my guns are ready to back its authority." On the way back from the futile chase he had cut off from

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

the rest to a hoeman's place and ordered the latter to go to the Loop-Y and tell Riner he wanted to see him. Little Joe understood the proud Riner well. If he went out and tried to arrest him, Riner would have made a fight. On the other hand, Riner was no back-shooter. His honor and pride would compel him to ride in at the request to prove he feared nothing.

IT WAS sundown when King Riner did appear at the jail. He was a slim, tall man with prematurely white hair that capped his eaglelike profile. With him he had Doc Banes from the Junction. Riner had already heard of the killing. He offered the Doc as his alibi. Banes swore he had been called to the Loop-Y late yesterday and had spent the night with Riner. Riner, he asserted, had suffered a severe heart attack.

"All right. Don't leave the country in case I want you," Little Joe said. But when they marched out, they had to pass through an angry throng in front of the jail. Riner stared them down without putting a hand on his gun butt, and the bunch stayed for some time to hurl jeers and insults at the deputy marshal. Inside he was still walking furiously, weighing every angle of the case in his brain.

It was about midnight when the shot spattered on the drone of the still angrily buzzing town. Little Joe hustled out of the jail and got down near the Lucky Deuce. He was just in time to see Yager, foreman of Riner's Loop-Y, come backing out with drawn smoking gun. "Nobody's going to call my boss a dry-gulching killer," he was shouting.

Pot-bellied Dab Tice, the late Solitaire's cousin, was in the doorway, swinging his gun up slowly. Little Joe, hands already filled, sprang forward and blasted two shots into the gilt-lettered sign just over the doorway.

"Pen them smokepoles, you gents!" he snapped as he plunged into the light from the gambling hell. "Pen

(Continued On Page 104)

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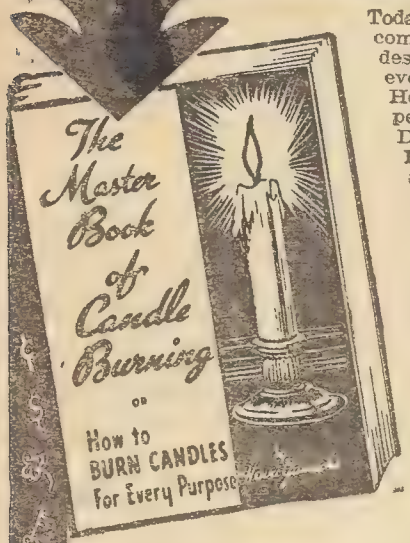

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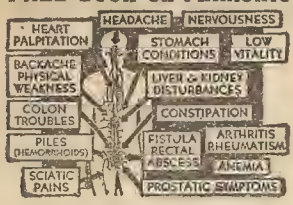

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(Continued From Page 102)

'em—or I'll take you in dead if I have to!"

Yager was a law-abiding sort and nodded as he raised his arms halfway. Dab Tice was a tinhorn braggart. He took one look at the deputy marshal's bleak white face and backed water, holstering with some sullen muttering.

Little Joe strode into the place and ordered a drink at the bar. It was a follow-up gesture to assert his authority. Sebore was there and tried to buy him a drink. The deputy plunked his coin loudly on the bar.

"Say, did Solitaire say anything afore he cashed his chips?" somebody asked. "Murdock says you got to him fust—just as he expired."

Little Joe let his eyes sweep the place, looking at Blackie Sebore a long moment. Something jumped in the deputy's mind. He tossed down his drink, said quietly, "Next time somebody gets the idee they're the Law here, I'm shooting first and parleying afterwards," and walked out. He had his clue. . .

It was the next forenoon when he dropped into the Lucky Deuce again. Feeling against him was running high in the town. Men were saying that if Ellard were there the killer would already be captured and as good as strung up. Solitaire Tice had been well liked because of his generosity. He was always good for a sawbuck for a poor devil who was in hard luck. And when times had been hard in a family, a big basket of food supplies would be left at the door. Everybody knew Solitaire was the one responsible for that, too.

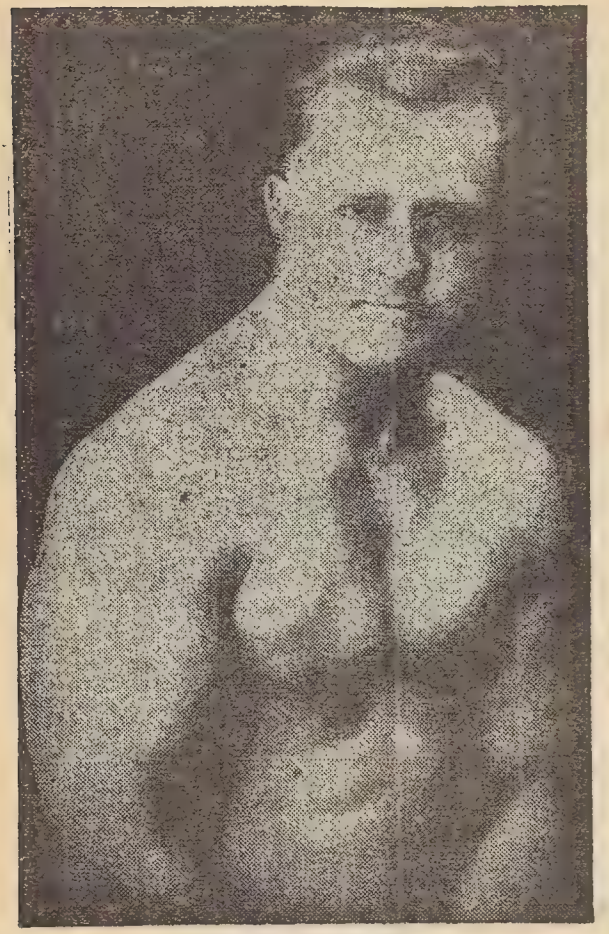
"If that lily-livered Bodie hadn't been afeared to rush that ledge they'd have got the killer," men said.

At the gambling hall bar, Little Joe looked around and then dropped his announcement casually. Sebore was present. He said he was staying in town till he saw justice done. Joe Bodie spoke almost directly to him.

"Got a note this morning from a gent who was passing through here the night of the killing," Little Joe said. "He saw the killer and can identify him. Seems like his con-

(Continued On Page 106)

THERE WERE GIANTS IN THOSE DAYS



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Western Action

(Continued From Page 104)

science is botherin' him and this gent is coming back. He'll be coming in on the Saturday stage—two days from now. I'm waiting for him."

Later he left and rode out of town. It was the next afternoon when Sebore dropped into the jail at his summons. "Sebore," Little Joe said, tossing a shell in his hand, "if they's trouble here when the killer is pointed out, I'm depending on your help with the marshal away. And I got a hunch you don't believe this hombre coming in can pick the killer."

"Now, Bodie, I'm plumb behind the law. Of course—"

"I want you to see something, anyway," Little Joe said as he led the way out. Mounted, they took the trail eastward on the stage run toward Pully's Gulch. At the head of it, they got down at the deputy's order and he started up the wooded side of it. Sebore was panting when they got halfway up. And then Little Joe pulled aside some foliage to reveal a small cave. Just around the end of the gulch so a man could come and leave it unobserved by anybody in the gulch, yet it commanded a view of it.

"Say, Bodie, if you've dragged me all the way up here to show me some old Injun relics or—"

"Look in here," Little Joe bade, having stepped inside. He fussed in the dirt then held up two ends of wire that came out of the earth. Sebore blinked. "Well?"

"Don't you savvy? Put these two ends of wire together and you complete the circuit. There's a battery somewheres and a load of dynamite with a percussion cap. The dynamite's probably planted up in that big chunk of overhanging rock 'cross the gulch there." He pointed to the face of seamed bare rock across the way. "The stage comes down the line. The gent hidden up here puts the wires together, completes the circuit and—boom! the dynamite goes off and the stage is crushed under a landslide of rock. Tons of it. And in the stage will be that gent who saw the killing of Solitaire Tice. See?

(Continued On Page 108)

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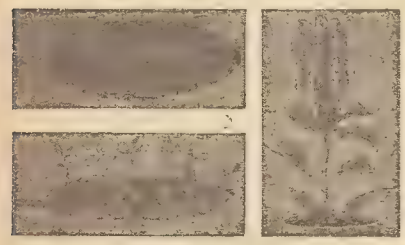

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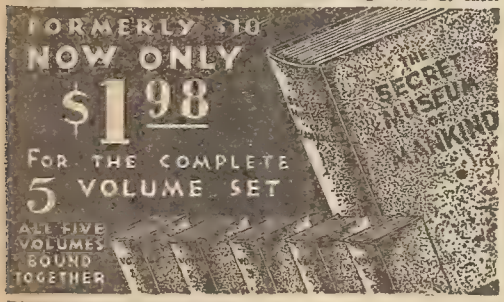

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(Continued From Page 106)

You just put the wire ends together like this and—"

SEBORE leaped forward and caught at Little Joe. "Hey, don't! You—you'll—" He was pale.

Little Joe put down the wires. "Well, it proves my point. Somebody's afraid. I reckon I'll let drop that this gent spent a considerable time up at Deer Lodge and can point out a few other wanted men in this town."

They walked out of the little cave. "Well, what're you going to do?" Sebore asked hoarsely. "You better locate the dynamite and—"

Little Joe smiled wisely. "No need to. I said the gent was coming in on the Saturday night stage. That was a trick. Actually he's coming through on the coach tonight."

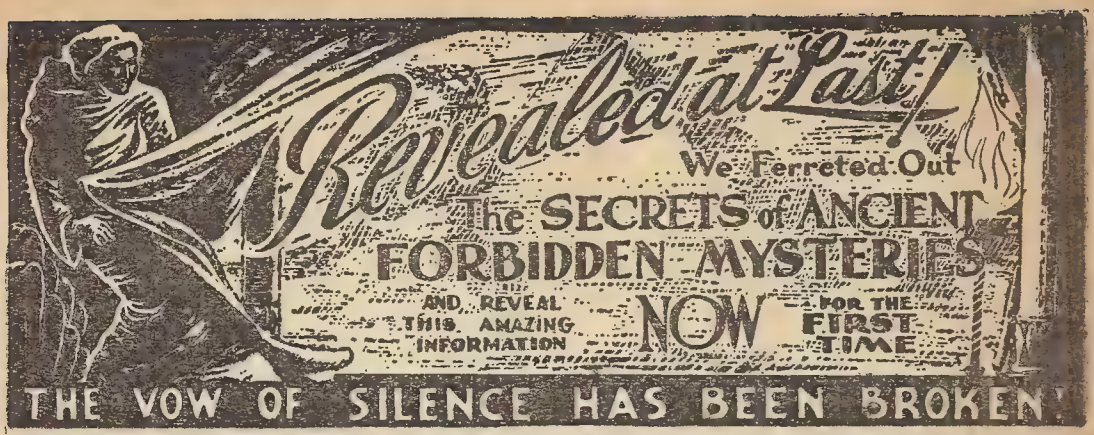
When they remounted, Sebore gave Little Joe a big clap on the back. "Say, you're one danged smart hairpin, Joe! I backed the right man all right."

A couple of hours later, back in town, Sebore announced that he was sending his whole outfit up to his north range. Said some cattle had been rustled off up there. . .

It was a little after midnight. And a cramp was twisting in Little Joe's thigh as he waited, hunkered down motionless on the gulch side about twenty yards off from the cave. A night bird called somewhere and he wondered when the stage was coming through. It was almost an hour behind schedule. It was at midnight he had instructed the jailor to come out from town with Ab Murdock and a few other trusted gents if he himself hadn't returned.

The wind soughed in the gulch. Yet sweat dribbled down the young deputy's taut jaws. He had gambled everything on this. If he were wrong. . . Then he heard the rattle of the stage and the grind of an ungreased axle through the wind. The Concord coach hoved into view around a curve in the gulch, the mule-skinner cracking the blacksnake over his jaded double team. Unmindful of any danger, it came on,

(Continued On Page 110)



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(Continued From Page 108)

jounced roughly in a mudhole as it drew abreast of the overhanging mass of rock.

Half a minute passed and the stage was beyond it and swinging out of the gulch. A sombreroed head bobbed from the cave entrance. A curse bit on the night. "It's a trick!" Sebore's heavy voice cried from the confines of the cave. "We gotta get out and—"

"Hoist 'em! We got you surrounded!" Little Joe roared as he leaped out of the undergrowth. He knew there were two men, had figured that way. But they weren't surrendering. There was a reason.

The first one flung sideward as he flung up an already drawn smokepole. Little Joe's right weapon coughed. He missed and was stunned as a low bough ripped the hat from the other's head. For it revealed the curly red hair of big Hank Ellard, marshal. And then the desperate Sebore barged into sight.

From the darkness of the cave, he had picked out Little Joe and he flung two snap shots. Little Joe came running aylong the canyon side, oblivious to the slug that whistled past his ear. He triggered and Sebore spun, drilled in the shoulder. Bellowing surrender, he went to his knees.

A stab of flame lanced toward Little Joe. He zigzagged and doubled, shooting at the second muzzle light once. Then the wind parted the tops of trees and let through the moonglow to spotlight him. Ellard darted from behind a tree and fired twice more. Steadying himself with deadly coolness, Little Joe drew bead with one outstretched gun and rode the trigger. Ellard went down, rolling yards, gun banged from his grip, his shooting arm broken and his scalp creased.

A SLUG furrowed Little Joe's cheek and he swayed dizzily. Then he saw the treacherous Sebore firing from his knees. Joe ran right at him and fired from ten feet. The bullet smashed right through Sebore's nose and blasted his brain. Lit-

(Continued On Page 112)

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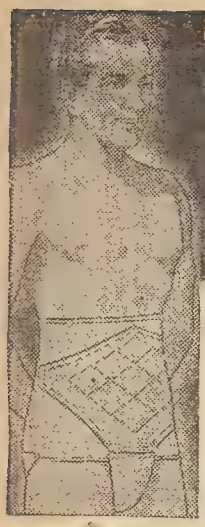

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(Continued From Page 110)

tle Joe grabbed a sapling to steady himself as Murdock galloped into the gulch, heading the bunch from town.

"It was right simple," he admitted modestly back at the jail, "once I got the drift of things. Ellard, back in the cell, has confessed so you know about everything. He and Sebore were working together to get revenge on Solitaire. That was why I was put into office. Ellard's being outa town when the shooting was done was no accident. They figured I'd never run it down."

"But you didn't have the deadwood to hang on Sebore till he showed his hand," Murdock said. "I cain't see how—"

"I remembered that more 'n ten years ago Sebore and King Riner had a fenceline fight and that Riner won in court. Sebore was out to get him for that as well as get Solitaire. So he simply slapped Riner's brand on a horse he'd bought, then killed it up there in the badlands to point suspicion on him. Sebore did the killing, lit out, and was met by Ellard up there. Ellard held us off from the ledge so Sebore could swing south down to his own place. Then Ellard took out over the desert. That had me fooled for a while. I couldn't figure how Sebore could hit out into the desert and get back to town early that same day and report at the jail. So—"

"But how did you know he had done it—"

Little Joe finished his drink and smiled slowly. "When somebody asked me at the Lucky Deuce if Solitaire said anything afore he died, I didn't answer. But Blackie Sebore didn't look worried none at all. He pumped the finishing shot into Solitaire with the gun against his body so he knew he couldn't have said anything. That was my tipoff. So I stuck them two wires in the ground and showed 'em to him after pulling the windy about a witness to the murder coming in on the stage. Sebore showed his hand. 'S all."

He rolled a quirly calmly. Outside the door a couple of men were saying how Little Joe would do a good job as new marshal all right. . .

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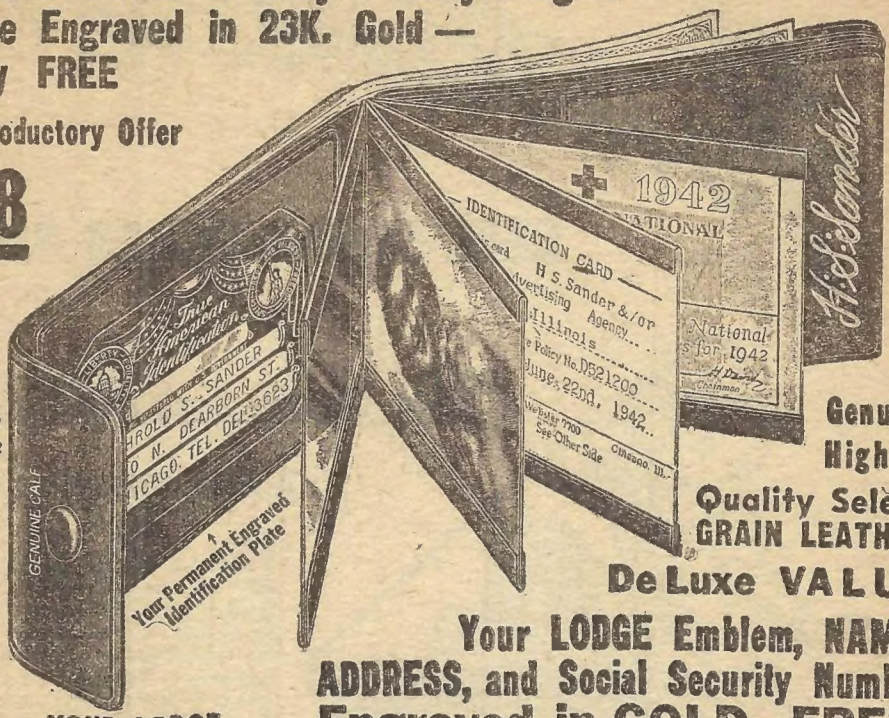

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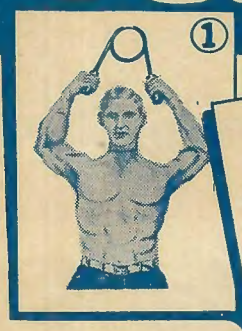

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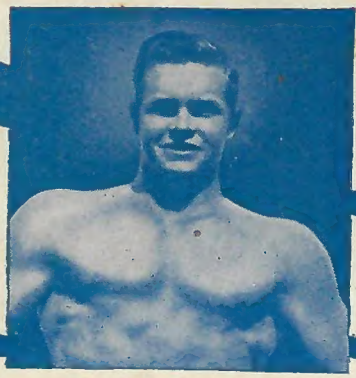

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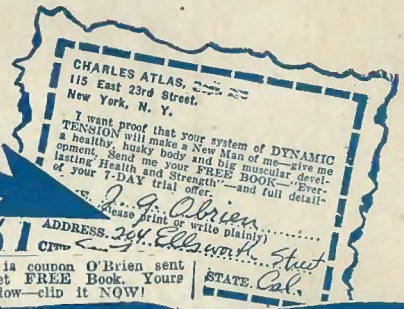
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